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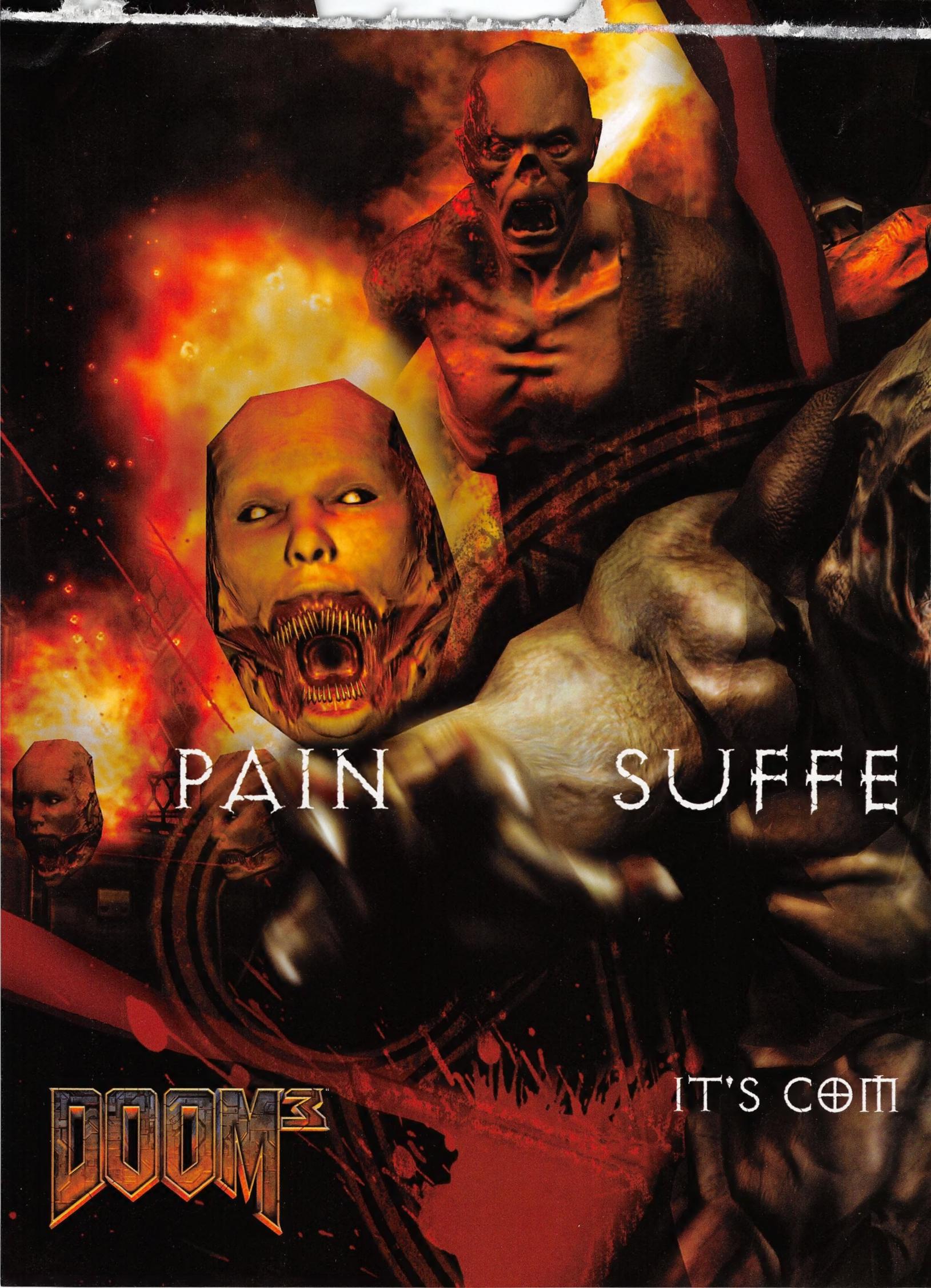


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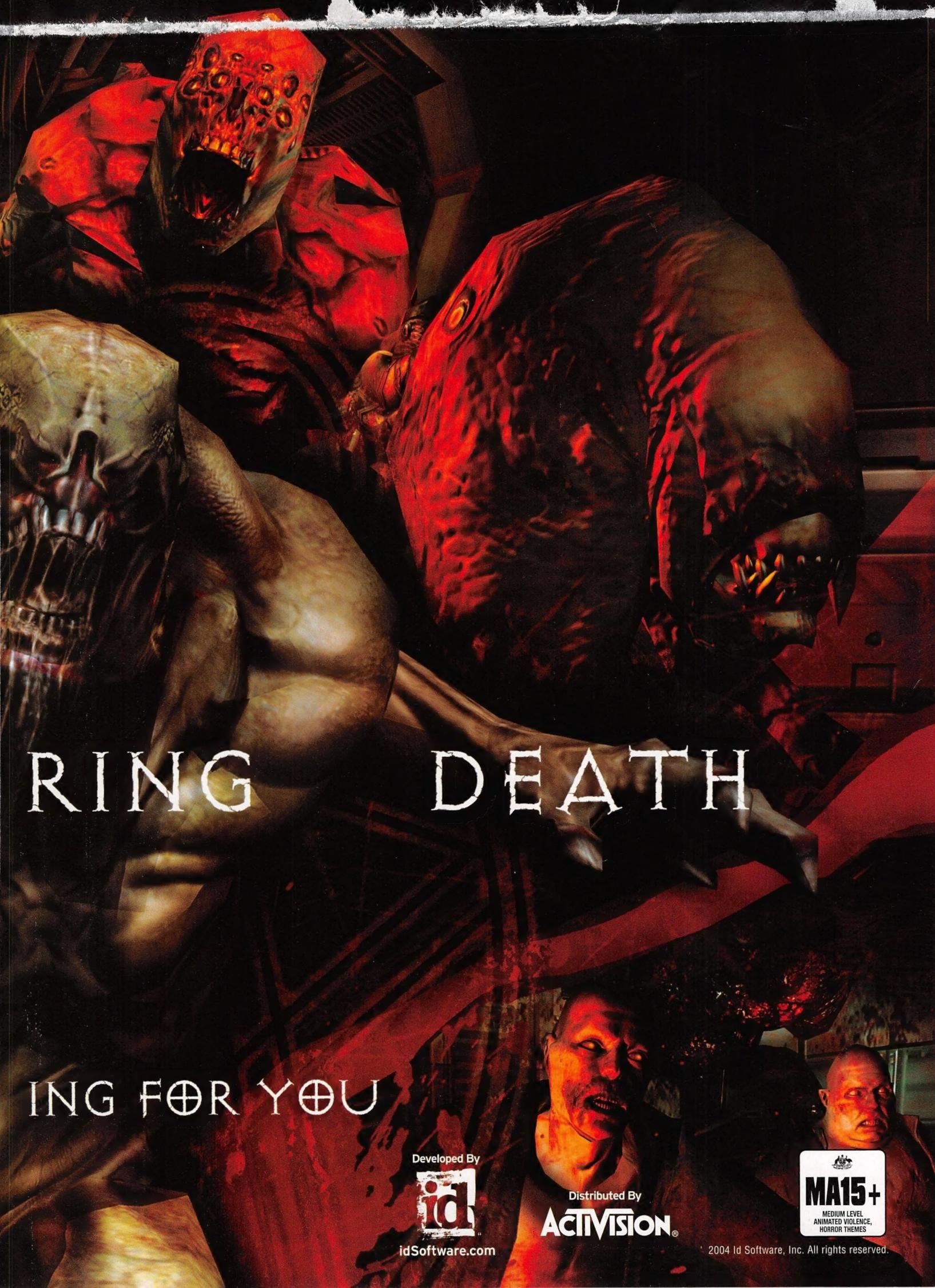
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Anthony Fordham goes tribal in Canberra. Yet still finds the time to file a report on this year's most promising online shooter...



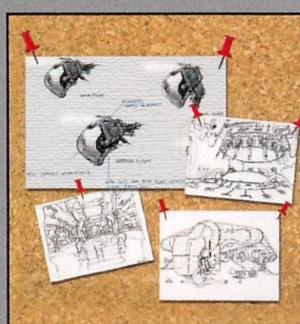
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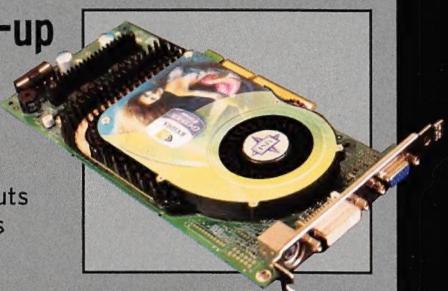
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ROME™ TOTAL WAR



Actual in-game screenshot



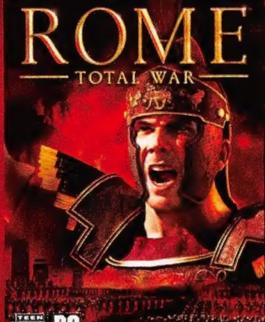
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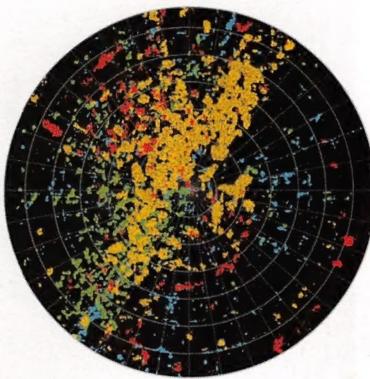
We take a look at the ethics of war games and ask if military sims are going too far in their desire to be realistic; plus we discover just how Half Life 2 is quite literally changing the face of gaming.

44 Subscribe and win!

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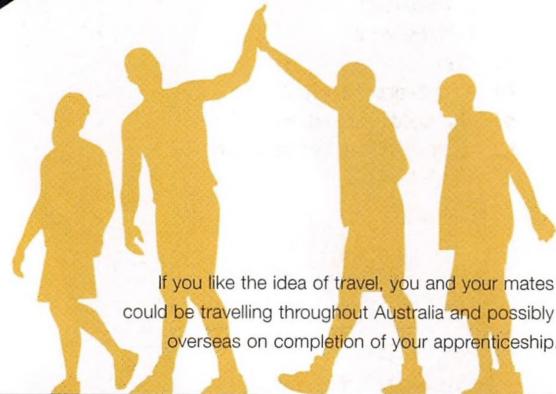
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The Budget Curse



Every week I receive a list detailing the ten best-selling PC games in Australia, as compiled by Inform based on sales throughout the majority of major chains and independent game stores. It is the most accurate sales report on the games industry there is available.

Every week, Bennett and I have a little chuckle at some of the games that make it into the chart. Generally we're not too bothered by the sight of The Sims House Party hanging around at #4, or Condition Zero consistently out-selling UT2004, because there's always a handful of quality titles making their presence felt. UT, Far Cry and Battlefield Vietnam have all sat atop the list at various times this year, albeit briefly.

But something happened last month that prompted something resembling despair and a few moments of self-doubt.

For the week ending July 18, the first eight entries in the PC sales chart were from the Sims franchise - the Deluxe version of the original and all seven expansion packs. At #9 was the first Harry Potter game (not the recent third in the series), while at #10 was Empires: Dawn of the Modern World from Activision (presumably selling again on the back of a heavily reduced RRP).

For the following week, Atari's Yu-Gi-Oh: Power of Chaos kids game debuted at #1, while the Sims monopoly was only further broken by Monopoly itself at #5. Right at the foot of the chart were Condition Zero and Rise of Nations (again, presumably the beneficiaries of some price slashing).

What the hell has happened to PC gaming? Where are all the so-called big releases of this year? Where are UT2004, Thief: Deadly Shadows, Pandora Tomorrow, Far Cry, Battlefield: Vietnam, Painkiller, Joint Operations and V8 Supercars 2?

The situation can be explained in part by the minimum RRP needed to qualify for the sales chart. On console, a game must be \$50 or over in order to be eligible for a chart placing; on PC, that cut-off point is only \$20. (The reason for this discrepancy is to do with the margins retailers make on PC games versus console titles.)

But still, the fact remains: PC games only seem to sell at a budget price. Big AAA titles like the aforementioned will hit the chart at full price in the first few weeks of release then sink like a stone. Give it six or nine months and people will start buying them again at \$49.95.

Conversely, the console charts I also receive are constantly well-stocked with new, full price titles. If people are prepared to buy a \$100 game for their Xbox, why are they seemingly not prepared to do likewise for their PC?

Are these grim times? Is piracy to blame? What does the future hold for PC gaming outside of the likes of DOOM 3, Half-Life 2 and the handful of other big releases that will actually sell at full price? I'd be interested to hear your thoughts...

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Dear PCPP



INBOX

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INBRED LITTLE HANDS

Counter-Strike is a disease and all who play it are filthy, stinking rats.

Gaming related stuff aside, I have a question for everyone at PC PowerPlay. As professional journalists, do you ever get sick of reading letters written by people who obviously don't go to school and never have, and apparently learn their gramma (sic) in chat rooms? It's not hard after a decade of compulsory schooling to come away knowing when to use an en-dash and when to use a hyphen, or the difference between 'there', 'their' and 'they're'.

Anthony Smith's letter in PCPP #101 made me wonder if he had ever learned about things I like to call 'sentences' in that special class they put him in. His second grade maths teacher needs to be shot too because it seems Anthony can't even count the eleven fingers on his inbred little hands. Aside from it being presumptuous to rank the three most important questions "man has ever had", after asking if PCPP can explain them, Anthony goes on to ask six more questions, inserting question marks where he sees fit (Hopefully Anthony is Amish because if I ever find him dealing blackjack to me at my local casino I'm afraid of what I might do.) And don't get me started on people using single characters instead of huge three-letter words. Some people make me wonder if there are thousands of those outback children out there who receive schooling over the phone, except having no landline and poor mobile reception have resorted to conducting English classes via text-messaging. For example, "Y R U L8 2 class, Anthony?"

I don't know how many letters the PCPP Inbox receives each month, but after reading just one that you deemed publishable - and worthy of a prize - I seriously considered writing an (sic) firm letter, criticising Anthony Smith.

Instead I wrote this one.

You may think that my point is something to do with the problem of making education available to all, but it isn't. My point is that not only will you stumble (fumble, maybe) across a colon between the rectum and the caecum; you can also find one in a well written letter, marking off a main portion of a sentence.

Pete

P.S. I do realise that if Anthony is in fact Amish it would be unlikely he would be writing to a computer-gaming magazine. P.P.S. Can I have a job at PC PowerPlay? I could answer the letters. And I could do it all from home, you'd never have to see me.

People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, Peter. It is a very nice glass house though, perhaps constructed of the same impervious glass we find in so many videogames. And you only made two spelling mistakes in the entire letter - surely a new record for the PCPP Inbox!

PIXEL-CLAD VIXEN

The other evening, whilst enjoying No-one Lives Forever 2, I ended up in an argument with my girlfriend after she teased me about being *cough* "attracted" to the central protagonist. I don't know why I became so defensive, because she was

right: Cate Archer is a babe, and her charms have as much to do with keeping me playing way past my bed-time as any plot device.

Moreover, Cate (I like to think I'm on familiar terms with her) is not the first pixel-clad vixen I've fallen for. There was the pain of choosing between Annah and Lady Fall-from-Grace in Planescape: Torment. And I'd rather not to mention the shame, confusion and Freudian conflict I went through when I discovered the plucky Imoen I fell for in Baldur's Gate 1 turned out to be the half-



sister of my player character in Baldur's Gate 2.

Anyway, it turns out that I'm not alone. Several of my friends and housemates freely nominated the game characters they'd like to spend a dirty digital weekend with, including (for men) April Ryan from The Longest Journey, and (for women) Gordon Freeman from Half-Life. And my girlfriend even confessed to a secret attraction for her Sims man - which started up another argument that doesn't need coverage here. To finally get to the point of my letter, there are some great computer game characters out there who appeal to the player on all sorts of levels. Your annual Top 100 games list is always fun, but I was wondering if you'd ever thought about doing a Top 100 (or even just top 10) characters list. I bet the games in it would be very different, and the scoring against different criteria would be interesting. Bring on the nominations!

"Hilary" Sissons

It was hard enough choosing between Annah and Fall-from-Grace (I went with Annah in the end) without having to decide the greatest character ever. However a snap poll around the office saw the following nominations: Leisure Suit Larry, Garrett, Dak'kon (Torment), Hunter (Wing Commander), Duke Nukem, SHODAN, Manuel Calavera (Grim Fandango), and er... Zell (Final Fantasy) and absolutely no consensus whatsoever.

WITH A GAS CAN

I'm just writing to say that I found Timothy C. Best's article on the PacManhattan experiment in issue 102 very interesting. Basically it involved a bunch of students recreating PacMan in the streets of Manhattan, and it has given me the inspiration to conduct my own game related experiment.

Next time Australia Post decides to deliver my copy of PC PowerPlay almost two weeks late, I plan on wandering down to my local post office with a gas can and a lighter and begin recreating some scenes from Postal 2. If I don't make bail, I'll get my lawyer to email through some photos of the experiment for your readers to enjoy.

Jamie Richter

Er... please don't.

MADE A MISTAKE

In reference to your Repair-A-Disk Review in PCPP#102, you mentioned www.discdoctor.com.au was a supplier of them. I emailed Disc Doctor and they said you had made a mistake. They only repair cds, they dont sell the hardware that does. I looked on www.razorprices.com but couldn't find the Repair-A-Disk their either, so I was wondering if you could direct me to where I could buy one.

Simon Papworth

The Typo Gremlin changed a "k" into a "c". The correct URL is www.diskdoctor.com.au - that's disk with a K!

THIS STRANGE BELIEF

I've noticed in the inbox section of the past few issues that several people have been discussing the amount of previews in your magazine. I for one enjoy reading the previews, and seeing those first pics of promising new ventures gets the imagination racing, but I have noticed that short previews for games are being published earlier and earlier in the development process. I mean sometimes there aren't even any screenshots, or even a name! I know you guys do your best to keep to the facts about a new game but the marketing machines out there have this strange belief that the earlier their game is known about, the more it will sell. For example: "So-And-So Interactive are possibly considering discussing

beginning thoughts on an MMORPG set in a world of some huge crisis. We'll listen for more info closer to release." Or this:
 "Some guy at the pub was discussing politics with his mates on Thursday, when he had the idea to think about creating an 'original' WWII shooter with realistic weapons and vehicles. We'll keep you posted."
 I love previews, but keep 'em real. I can make up my own ideas for games that'll never happen.

Warwick Davey

There are only two types of preview you'll read in PCPP. One takes the form of an interview with the development team – thus providing you with an overview of their plans, hopes and ambitions for the game. The other will be based on actually playing the game – thus providing you with our hands-on impressions on how the game is coming along. Anything else we'll leave for others that don't concern themselves with substance.



MAG ON MY BED

I've been playing Thief: Deadly Shadows since the first day of release. It has been and continues to be one of the most immersive and satisfying single player experiences since Deus Ex. When I walked into the newsagent to buy my copy of PCPP, I glanced at the front cover and on the top I saw that the mag contained a Thief 3 review. I said to myself, "They better have scored it over 90 or I'm never going to agree with anything PCPP has to say ever again." I got home, read the review, placed the mag on my bed, bowed my head and thanked the good spirits for such a great review. The Shalebridge Cradle is the only level in any game that I have had to stop playing due to a sensory overload. That mission can only be played after midnight, no-one awake, lights out - hell I even blue tacked all my LED lights, very scary. Great game. Great review. Great mag. Keep up the awesome work guys.

Sean Gabriel

Cheers.

EXCITEDLY FLICKED

It is exciting to read your reviews on the up coming games and to choose which of them I must play. But all that excitement can turn to excruciating pain when something goes wrong with the set up or your equipment doesn't perform. You can't play games if the equipment is suffering and you don't know the cure. Playing games is the easy part; the knowledge to solve problems that can occur is vital to a gamer's sanity. This is one of the main reasons why I subscribe to your magazine; you have been providing me through your Setup and Tech articles with that knowledge. Today when I received my August issue I excitedly flicked through the pages looking for Setup as I always do. I was horrified, it was missing again. I was hoping to find an answer to a problem I had written in about. Frantically I looked through the entire magazine thinking, where is he? To me the most important articles in PCPP are those written by Stuart Calvin. The knowledge he supplies is hard to come by. I need it and I need it now. Please explain.

Fran Shepherd-Cope

Stuart's taking a bit of a break – a bit of R&R as he would put it. Setup will return soon in some way, shape or form.

MILK GTA

When Vice City initially came out, did Rockstar claim that it was exclusively for PS2, before releasing it on PC? Because I'm just wondering if they are trying to scare us into buying a PS2, or milk GTA: San Andreas for as long as possible for console.

James Donohughe

Sony obviously pays Rockstar a lot of money to ensure the GTA games arrive on PS2 first. We would be very surprised if San Andreas doesn't appear on PC at some point during 2005.

ENCROACHING RIGOR MORTIS

At what stage in the beta testing is it appropriate for a games company to release a "finished product", expecting the consumer to then haunt their website, waiting for the latest patch to fix those damn bugs in the gameplay? The particular game I have in mind is Sacred, Ascaron Entertainment's extremely flawed foray into the mystical world of Ancaria. I purchased this game despite the warning in PCPP#101 that the game was bugged. "So what", I thought, "they all are bugged – I'll just download the patch". Alas, I should have listened to the eminent Eliot Fish and stayed away from the game. In singleplayer mode it works just fine; but in two-player mode, we have to save the game at five minute intervals – and even then not all the quests work, the map plays funny-buggers, the monsters stay standing despite encroaching rigor mortis, and worst of all, the game hangs regularly. So – do I ask for my money back, despite the fact that the game works fine if we play separately? If I purchased any other product that had to be regularly patched, and even then did not fully function, I would have a solid case to take to the small claims tribunal.

So I return to my original question: Are there any readers who are consumer-rights advocates? If so, what are the rights of the consumer in cases such as this? Meanwhile, there's an open beta of patch 1.7 on the website. I always wanted to be a game tester, but I always thought that I would be the one who is being paid, not the other way around.

Robert Bishop

I'm sure this is something that has crossed the mind of plenty of our readers. We'll take a look at the topic in an upcoming issue.

FULFILLING MY DREAM

Placing my PCPP #102 CD1 into my CD Drive, expecting to install Singles: Flirt up your Life and play the best demo in the world (not), I was pleasantly surprised to find out that CD1 was not in fact the advertised PCPP disc, but an INDONESIAN KARAOKE VCD!!!

Not only that, it is the exact VCD that I have been searching for my entire 20 years of existence on this planet: 15 SUPER MEGA BINTANG MTV - KARAOKE (Metrorama Records). So, this is just a thank you note for fulfilling my dream. Whether or not I was the lucky winner of a Far Cry-like giveaway or not doesn't matter... I am eternally grateful. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Brian Siao

It appears the Karaoke Promotion was a raging success. However, if you purchased the CD edition and were not entirely happy with the contents of CD1, please drop us an email (including your postal address) and we'll send you a replacement disc as soon as possible.



Dear PCPP



The Leprechaun tells me to burn things!

Joshua Park

Can he burn this letter, too?

You punch an old lady and you don't want her hardcore AI to come back and bite you in the ass eventually do you?

Alex Vulkanovski

Unless it's SHODAN.

Could someone please explain why my #102 DVD case smelt incredibly strongly of licorice. I'm serious.

KrogothZero

It's our new, edible packaging.



The mag is looking aces.
Daniel Cooper
We're glad you notices.

Now my father wants to get rid of the internet & I don't blame him.

Shaun Wild

An ambitious man.

Don't bother putting dis in da mag (sic) but I am wondering if people whose snippets get printed also get an Atari Heroes game?

James G

No. In fact, no one gets an Atari Heroes game any more.

When the shubbar came they took the stone and they realised that wherever the stone went the Tauran went.

Michael

Everybody smile at the crazy man...

Am I really such a bastard without my Nymph Cloak +4?

Shaun Cooper

Only if it causes you to fail your saving throw versus illegitimacy.

What degree would I have to do to get a chance of working for a computer magazine?

Dean Campbell

Arts and Communications are perhaps the most relevant. But, really, you just need to convince an Editor that you can write.

Who does one have to shag to find a retail copy of Fallout or Fallout 2?

Jamie Richter

Sadly you're not our type.

Nic Italiano

Just curious as to whose side you are on?

We're all on the side of Amos.



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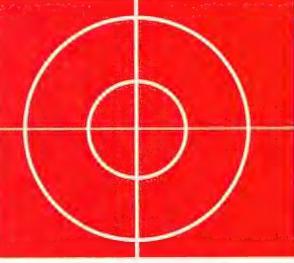
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Insight



Ethics of War

INCREASING REALISM MEANS WAR GAMES NOW RUN THE RISK OF OFFENDING REAL VICTIMS.
ANTHONY FORDHAM EXAMINES THE SCOPE OF THE ISSUE...

While I've never been out-and-out offended by a game, I've come across more than a few that make me think "hmn, I'm not sure where the line is but this game might just be crossing it."

Shellshock Nam '67, not yet completed but already in playable form, is one such game. The opening cinematic shows real footage of real Vietnam War victims really suffering. We see women crying over their dead children, cities bombed to pieces, US GIs in the grip of post-traumatic stress disorder and of course scores upon scores of casualties. This is not pre-rendered 3D, this is real news footage from the war.

It's one thing to romanticise combat and turn killers into heroes, but its quite another to present real suffering as entertainment.

Yet there's been surprisingly little thinking done on this issue. Most critical thinkers instead focus on the war game's potential to turn players into killers, an assertion which almost everyone who has actually played a computer game rejects.

For instance, Australian Financial Review journalist Mark Lawson writing on the lack of morality in games, says "the Vietnam War was certainly a

distressing event in the real world but computer games are a world of their own with their own morality. Most computer gamers would napalm the village just to see whether the result was cool."

Which is undeniably true for a wide section of the gaming community, but it once again misses the central point: being entertained by the Vietnam War won't make you a killer, but does it make you, in some small way, a bad person?

Stanley Kubrick's definitive anti-Vietnam War film Full Metal Jacket tried to shock viewers with the brutality of the US Marine Corps' training regime, which eventually leads one recruit to murder and suicide. Yet one of the side-effects of the film was two generations of schoolyard fascists emulating R Lee Ermey's screaming, swearing, sexually-aggressive methodology. Far from evil and domineering, young boys found the Gunnery Sergeant entertaining.

The main difference between Shellshock Nam '67 and Full Metal Jacket is that the game isn't intended to be critical of the war. In fact, it's almost as if those young boys who found the Gunnery Sergeant's screaming fits so entertaining are the ones who have



WHAT ABOUT THE GIRLS?

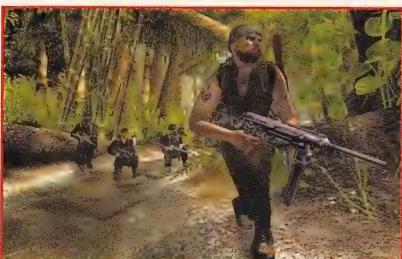
Melissa Chaika at the Association for Computing Machinery claims another side effect of promotion of war as entertainment.

"Many women avoid computing due to the historically military focus of technology and the male fascination with war. Indeed, the more information technologies are linked with defence (as in computer war games) and with the engineering and science domains, the more girls tend to distance themselves," she says.

Her argument is that the reason the gender skew in gaming is still so massive is because women are mostly just not interested in being entertained by killing, burning, looting and politics.

Perhaps the best example of this is in one couple's Neverwinter Nights experience. While the wife spoke to every NPC looking for new sub-quests, and checked every container for special items, the husband just ran through the catacombs killing everything he found.

Story of the world, really...



made the game. It is, after all, supposed to be fun.

Lawson goes on to argue that most games throw ideas of morality out the window and require the player to act in an entirely utilitarian manner; act only in self-interest or die.

"Early in a game of Civilization 3 your civilisation is weak and is well-advised to stay out of conflicts with others. Later in the game the attitude becomes more 'are you talking to me?'" he says.

He notes that in Civ 3, it's a good idea to convert to a fascist government and build a few concentration camps to keep the populace in line, then make a peace deal so you can re-arm in secret and attack your neighbours, thus breaking the treaty in a far more flagrant display of aggression than even real-life Nazi Germany managed in its hey-day.

Once again, a game as abstract as Civ 3 isn't going to turn you into a fascist, but should we be concerned that we're 'playing' with the same ideas that burned Europe and killed tens of millions of real people? That we now find the idea of concentration camps amusing and entertaining, at least in this context?

Think about this issue long enough and the whole business of playing games based on real wars becomes not so much disturbing as grotesque. Consider the popularity in Japan of Medal of Honor: Rising Sun. As more than one observer has noted, young Japanese

men are gleefully gunning down digital abstractions of their own grandfathers.

Strip it all down and the argument is the same as the one fired at violent films: does engaging in cartoonish violence (and cartoonish moral decisions) desensitise us to real-life violence and difficult moral decisions, or does it give us a more open and useful perspective on war? In other words, because we've all played Call of Duty, does that mean we'll support conscription?

Surely not, but it may affect our thinking about the issues surrounding going to war and perhaps more importantly, the continuing effects of past wars. Because we find the Vietnam War entertaining, we may find it all too easy to say to the children of people who were hideously burnt by real napalm "get over it, the war happened a generation ago."

But before we start blaming games for making war cool, it should be pointed out that a significant proportion of enlistees do so because they already think war is cool anyway.

Michael Moore's latest anti-Administration film Fahrenheit 9/11 spends some time talking to grunts on the streets of Bagdad, in which we discover that US soldiers like to put Bloodhound Gang's The Roof is on Fire on the tank's intercom system and thrash away as they kill real people with real bullets.

Suddenly the games don't look so bad after all.



UP, UP AND AWAY

Flight simmers rejoice, for our passion is about to get its first public outing in Australia. The Australian Flight Simulation Expo is kicking off on Saturday the 28th of August, from 11am until 4pm. In what could be the greatest venue choice ever made, it's being held at the T2 Function Centre, located in the Virgin Blue domestic terminal at the Sydney International Airport. A large portion of the day's activities revolve around a 100 person LAN, but there won't be any Counterstrike on show here folks. Instead it's going to be 100% pure unadulterated simming bliss, with the likes of Falcon 4, LOMAC, IL2 and Red Baron 3D all taking to the virtual skies in the Top Gun competition. There will also be several guest presenters, as well as a demonstration of Ubisoft's new Pacific Fighters flight sim. Head on over to <http://ozfs-expo.com/> for the full rundown, and stay tuned for our coverage of the show.

Windows nV

NVIDIA ANNOUNCES A NEW OS TO CONTROL YOUR LOUNGE ROOM. BENNETT RING GETS COMFY ON THE COUCH...

When you go to an NVIDIA presentation to discuss its graphics cards, you generally don't expect to walk out of the meeting with quivering expectations of a new operating system. Yet this occurred when PCPP attended a recent meeting in Sydney with Dr Brian Kirk, chief scientist at NVIDIA.

Buried amidst the dozens of PowerPoint slides pimping NVIDIA's vision of PC graphics were a couple of slides discussing a new Unix-based operating system being designed by NVIDIA. Yes, we were surprised as well. After a quick check to confirm that our coffees hadn't been laced with psilocybin, we soon realised NVIDIA had just let a rather large cat out of the bag.

Dr Kirk went to great pains to explain that this operating system is not meant to rival Microsoft's fortune maker. No doubt this was meant to appease the invisible cyborg ninjas Microsoft employs to hunt down and destroy anybody who mentions the words "developing" and "operating system" in the same sentence.

However, it soon became clear that this operating system will in fact offer competition to Windows Media Centre – provided all you want your operating system to do is play movies and audio, as well as display slideshows of your happy snaps. Which will probably satisfy a large chunk of the Media Centre audience.

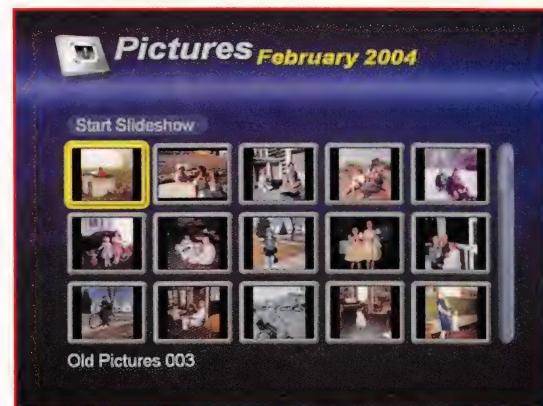
Known as nStant Media, by far the coolest feature of NVIDIA's operating system is a boot time of around 5 seconds. No longer will you need to sit around for a minute or so as your media box boots up to watch a DVD. This might not sound too significant to average PC users, but for those with limited PC experience this is a big deal. It moves the PC closer to becoming a traditional consumer electronics device, which appears to be the holy grail of all hardware manufacturers at the moment.

The software uses an interface that is very similar to NVIDIA's current Forceware media suite, with a ten foot interface. This doesn't mean the screen is ten feet wide. It's referring to the fact that most media boxes are used via a remote from a distance of around ten feet. Therefore a ten foot interface uses lots of big icons and large fonts as the traditional Windows desktop is hard to read at that distance. It's also designed to be easy to navigate with a remote control, which NVIDIA will also be selling separately.

The DVD player contained within nStant Media offers a decent swag of features. As well supporting the DVD-Video standard, both VCD 1.0 and 2.0 are also compatible. You'll be able to capture image frames, as well as audio streams from your favourite flicks. If you'd rather your kiddies weren't scarred for life by your Hellraiser collection, password protection based on the film rating is also included.

If you're a fan of ripping your movies to your hard drive, or have a nice little collection of Bit Torrent collectibles, you'll be able to play video files from your hard drive. They'll need to be MPEG-1, MPEG-2 or unencrypted DVD-Video files such as VOB or VRO.

The MPEG-2 video decoder will take full advantage of hardware acceleration if your video card supports it, and also supports TV-out and overscan correction. Inverse 3:2 pulldown correction is also featured – ask your nearest home theatre buff for a detailed explanation of this cool feature.



3:56 PM Fri, May 7

As you'd expect full Dolby Digital 5.1 support is provided, but it's nice to see a few other Dolby formats also included. Dolby Headphone is handy for those of you with neighbours who don't tolerate midnight movie marathons rattling their floorboards, but support for DTS is the icing on the cake, provided you've got the necessary hardware to handle it.

As well as playing DVDs, nStant Media will also allow playback of three types of audio: CD Audio (CDA), MP3 and Windows Media Audio (WMA). It's clever enough to search your hard drive automatically, looking for these audio files which it will then catalogue.

If you've got a stack of JPG files on your PC, you can set up slideshows to run while you're playing music. Finally the many hours you've spent collecting images at www.freenudepics.com can be merged with the MP3s you've downloaded from www.hotorgysoundfx.org. Does life get any better than this, we ask?

Well yes, it does. You see, nStant Media is 100% totally and utterly free. You won't need to spend a brass razoo on this operating system. Sure, you can't run Word or play any games on it, but many people don't need their media boxes to be able to. Unfortunately it's missing support for Digital TV as well as an accompanying personal video recorder, but Dr Kirk suggested that these features are in the development pipeline.

There's one final caveat though. You guessed it – to use this software you're going to need to be the proud owner of an NVIDIA video card. A GeForce FX Go or later, to be precise. We can't blame NVIDIA for only supporting its products, and we're sure that sooner or later an ingenious backyard coder will come up with a patch to allow this to run on any hardware. nStant Media should be making its debut towards the end of the year, so get those bags of popcorn and Jaffas ready.



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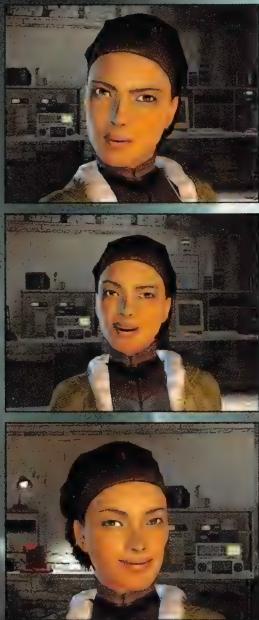
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Blades of Avernum

■ Developer: Spiderweb Software ■ Genre: RPG ■ URL: www.spiderwebsoftware.com ■ Downloads: www.spiderwebsoftware.com/products



GARAGE GAMES
WITH GEORGE SOROPOS

With its isometric graphics and natty character portraits Blades of Avernum is what you might call an Old Skool RPG. It is actually the fourth game in the Avernum series produced by Spiderweb software and their three person team of Jeff Vogel, Mariann Krizsan and Linda Strout. The attraction of Blades obviously isn't in its awesome Dx9 graphics or its expensive movie licensing deal but just good old fashioned gameplay. There are three scenarios in the full version of the

game (one in the demo) with each being increasingly more difficult. Extensive editing tools also allow players to create their own scenarios, and quite a few players have already done some good work with them. Spiderweb have taken this aspect of their game one step further and even offering prize money for the best three custom scenarios submitted to them by June next year. Another aspect of Spiderweb that you might find interesting is that they use freelance graphics and sound designers.

If you have some snazzy RPG style graphics in your portfolio or know how to synthesise the clang of sword against codpiece you might want to contact them through their site address above. We used our plus three proctoscope of infinite irritation to force Jeff Vogel into the hot seat and asked him about Spiderweb and Blades.
PCPP: One aspect of indie game design that can put off potential developers is the time it takes and the lack of income they will have to cope with while that

Changing the face of gaming

VALVE IS ENDEAVOURING TO PERFECT THE VIRTUAL ACTOR. DAVID WILGOOSE STRIKES A POSE...

Verisimilitude is a key component of any game that strives to immerse you inside its world. In the sense that immersion requires a game world that is credible, consistent and coherent it's important that said game world is built upon a foundation based in reality.

A first-person perspective is immersive because it's how we view the real world - since we only see what the protagonist sees, we can more readily believe we are that character. A solid physics simulation adds to the immersion because things behave as you would expect - properly simulated, the interaction between physical objects is intuitive (e.g. push a crate and it will move, fire will ignite wood or oil, etc). The inclusion of functioning everyday objects such as doors, faucets, drawers, vending machines and the like also add to the plausibility of the game world and heighten that illusion of reality. If we can believe in the game world then we're most of the way to be immersed within it.

But sometimes it only takes one aspect be to be slightly askew for that illusion to be shattered. And one of the toughest challenges facing game developers today is the creation of believable characters.

"For Half-Life 2 we've really tried to solve the problem of having characters seem a lot more alive a lot more of the time, and act in such a way that they know where the player is and they respond to them," says Valve Software's Bill van Buren. "We do a lot of that work in Face Poser, which is a tool that we wrote because there wasn't anything that really solved the problem for us."

It's one thing to hire a professional writer to pen your script or talented actors to voice your characters. But if the actual in-game character models have all the smooth animation of a Lego man or possess the dynamic facial expression of a particularly dim zombie, then you may as well not have bothered. No player is going to believe in a character whose lip-synching is out of whack and loops through the same hand gestures every two seconds, but that's pretty much what we see in every new release.

Thanks to the phenomenal success of Half-Life, Valve has had the luxury of being able to invest enough time and money to tackle this particularly thorny technology problem. With Face Poser, they believe they may have found a solution.

"We set it up sort of like a radio play," explains van Buren. Face Poser provides a simple interface for the designer to instruct in-game characters to move to and interact with any object or character in the scene. They can also be told to look at a particular character (including the player) or object within the scene. All this is as simple as attaching a few tags.

Further, the tool allows the designer to control and manipulate the facial muscles on each character to create a broad range of appropriate expressions. Working from a large selection of generic expressions or "primitives" (a raised eyebrow or a chuckle, for instance), a series of sliders built into Face Poser means these can be tweaked to suit the situation (with a touch of a dial, that raised eyebrow can switch from surprise to scepticism).

It can also convert any line of recorded speech into a series of phonemes ready for the lip-synching to kick in.

During a conversation sequence, the facial expressions, gestures, speech and other animation instructions play out on a synchronised timeline, with Face Poser doing the work behind-the-scenes to transition everything in as seamless fashion as possible.

"Instead of trying to do this linearly in a 3D package and then have it work in the engine - which is pretty much impossible unless it's a cinematic - we basically set all this stuff up so all these actions are blended in real-time in the engine," says van Buren. "Generally we'll go in and tune it a little bit but what it does first shot is pretty good and would be good enough for a lot of cases."

It is this scalability that makes the tool so effective. Lengthy and important scenes may require the exploitation of the full range of the tools, but brief conversations with minor characters might only need a gesture and an appropriate facial animation, which is as easy as ticking a few boxes. Van Buren claims Valve's animators can probably do around 15 of these simpler dialogue exchanges per day.

This is excellent news for the mod community too, as just as Valve did with Half-Life and its authoring tools, every aspiring Half-Life 2 mod-maker is going to have access to Face Poser as well as a version of SoftImage.

"As an animator before, your options were limited - you had to have a pretty good package to do reasonable animations," says Valve's Doug Lombardi. "Now, if you're working with the free version of SoftImage XSI, Face Poser and the other tools that we're providing, and you've got a bunch of sample content showing you exactly how it's done, I'm hoping that a lot more animators are going to get excited about working in the mod space."

"When the character looks at you when they say something, it makes a huge difference," van Buren continues. They say that seeing is believing, so if we can believe a character is seeing us then we surely must believe in them and the world they inhabit.

Half-Life 2 is a year late but if that illusion of reality holds strong, then it'll be worth the wait.



process is going on. How long did it take to create Blades of Avernum and was it a full time job for all of you?

JV: Well we spent about two years working on Blades. We have been around long enough and worked hard enough to have quite a few titles under our belts now, and their success has let us do this full time.

PCPP: You are obviously a fan of old skool RPGs, what are your favourite titles and did they influence the design of Avernum at all? What about fantasy literature?

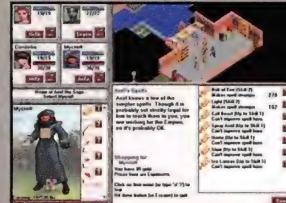
JV: I have been playing computer RPGs about as long as they've existed. The Ultima series was my biggest influence, though I was also heavily touched by Wizardry, Phantasie, Wizard's Crown, and a lot of others. However I read almost no



fantasy. I am more heavily influenced by the daily papers, believe it or not!

PCPP: How much influence has input from players of your older titles had on Avernum's design?

JV: Since Blades is a continuation of a series of games I really tried to use what I learned from those earlier titles. Our site is linked to some very active forums for our titles and lots of our gamers



have great ideas and have made some impressive scenarios using our editors so know what they are talking about when they tell us what they want!

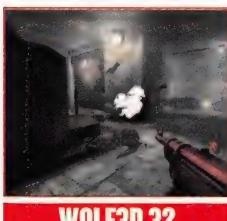
PCPP: Do you have any advice for people looking to get into indie game development?

JV: Work very hard. Ship whatever you do. And don't forget to learn everything you can about marketing!



Perception and Persistence

TIMOTHY C. BEST INVESTIGATES PLANS TO BRING SG-1 DOWN UNDER...



WOLF3D 3?

Todd Hollenshead, CEO of id Software, has recently revealed that another Wolfenstein game is in the works or, as he puts it, a "sequel to Return to Castle Wolfenstein". Hollenshead wouldn't say who is developing the game, only that it is not an internal project at id. The smart money however is on Splash Damage, the UK studio responsible for Enemy Territory and DOOM 3's multiplayer.



CHAOS THEORY

The game formerly known as Splinter Cell 3 has been given its real name. In a move that continues the recent trend of eliminating numbers from game titles, Ubisoft has ditched the 3 and added a colon with a subtitle. Why? Because it's not a sequel per se, but the next in the franchise. It implies that you need not to have played the earlier games in order to enjoy this one. Oh, and the name of that subtitle? Splinter Cell: Chaos theory.



COLIN QUINTET

Everyone's favourite Scottish rally driver with his own videogame is back. And once again he's a year early, with Colin McRae Rally 2005 on track for release before the end of this year. Of particular note is the inclusion of a genuine career mode, while the usual "more of..." hyperbole applies to everything else - cars, tracks and stages.



SG-1

A couple of months ago we reported that Australia's very own Perception had managed to snag the license to the US Sci-Fi channel's top rating show: Stargate. To put that in perspective, the show is watched in 60 countries and The Age reported it as being an \$11.5 million deal.

What makes this all the more impressive was that Perception's Managing Director, Ben Lenzo, just cold-called the suckers. There was none of that friends of friends, publisher recommendation or blackmail stuff, just good old-fashion confidence and late-night international calls.

Lenzo explains: "We basically called MGM Interactive out of the blue. We cold called and dealt with some people there originally that got us nowhere.

"They just didn't seem to understand what we were trying to do. They then had a change of guard at MGM Interactive and the new people were receptive to a game about Stargate."

What also makes the Perception pitch stand out is the business wheeling and dealing behind it. Normally, a publisher, not a small Sydney developer, will use its big-company clout to secure a license and then it will develop a title internally or hire on a third party studio, while keeping the game rights and the control.

Perception, on the other hand, not only arranged the whole development deal but promised MGM that it would also put together the deal to get it out on shelves. In other words, they did just what a publisher would have done.

"Well, I knew we could do the job," says Lenzo.

"The reality of the situation is that as a developer, we could keep going to publishers with our hat in our hand and say 'We've got this great idea for a game, a great prototype, please fund it for us.' Unfortunately to do a deal like that more often than not gives you very little control over the whole process. We wanted to break out of that."

Of course, to deliver what he promised Lenzo would still have to enlist the aid of a publisher, and he says that some just "couldn't get there head around not controlling the license," but finally Perception toughed it out and teamed with JoWood to put all the pieces in place.

It had been a long road. Way before thoughts of modelling Richard Dean Anderson, the lads were drawing



up business plans that kept telling them the same thing: getting paid by publishers for hitting milestones probably wasn't sustainable in the long term, even if everything went to plan. What they really needed to do was take more control of their future and that meant wheeling and dealing.

Looking around nothing grabbed the Perception team, until Stargate, that is. Lenzo said the show looked perfect for games and was growing in popularity every year, making it just the right fit.

"So, it wasn't a question of why did I think MGM would trust us with the license, it was more the fact that what we'd been doing - having no control and being reliant on publishers for milestone payments - was something we had to break out of if we wanted a real business," he says.

"Failing wasn't something we thought of."

After Lenzo managed to get some meetings in the US, he put together a presentation with Perception's arcade games, an original PS2 title the studio was working on, and a design for the first Stargate game.

What tipped the deal in Perception's favour? "Well you'd have to ask them for the details," says Lenzo, "but I've gotta think that other than proving we could do a good job, and getting a financial deal in place that made sense, that passion was a big one. "One of the things I was telling MGM was that for Perception, we will treat Stargate as a pillar franchise of our development business."

Maybe Perception's story isn't all that unique. All it takes to get things done is a plan, persistence, passion, and a lot of plane tickets.



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WARTS AND ALL

Who remembers Conquest: Frontier Wars? Yep, that's right, it was the space based RTS from Digital Anvil, the ill-fated development house established by Chris "Wing Commander" Roberts a few years back. Despite Conquest's minimal success, English studio Warthog has secured the rights and started work on a sequel, apparently with a team comprised of many of those who worked on the original.

Co-Op is Not PC

ANTHONY FORDHAM IS SICK OF PLAYING WITH HIMSELF, SO HE GOES LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO PLAY WITH HIM, NOT AGAINST HIM...

There was a time when we could boot up any multiplayer PC game we liked and instead of yet another deathmatch of trash-talk and rocket-jumping, we could instead take on the hordes of evil in co-op mode.

Doom does it best, of course, by allowing level designers to add more monsters and different trap triggers just for co-op. But Descent too is great fun, two ships against the horde of killer robots.

Nowadays, of course, co-op games are few and far between. RTS doesn't really count, because it's just the same as a human-vs-human match except the computer takes the role of some of the humans. Serious Sam has a 'classic' co-op mode, but is basically just Doom all over again.

Neverwinter Nights makes a decent fist of co-op campaigns, but it is up to third-party module developers to implement them properly. Playing the out-of-the-box modules with a friend feels less like co-op and more like two people running around in the same world not really interacting with each other.

In fact, if you want a decent co-op gaming experience, you have to turn to console. Baldur's Gate Dark Alliance, for instance, is great, running through the dank sewer slaughtering wave upon wave of homing rats together.

So what's the big deal? Why is co-op becoming so neglected? It seems the answer is quite simple: co-op is really hard to program.

Consider a game like Half-Life, for instance. Less a living breathing world and more a collection of trigger points for scripted events, somehow co-ordinating the whole thing to take account of two or more players moving through the game space would have been an absolutely titanic challenge.

If player 1 wants to run through the game as fast as possible, player 2 may find themselves wandering empty corridors, or trying to make sense of a plot



where events have been triggered out of sequence.

Shiny's Randy Pitchford says the Halo team found it relatively easy to implement co-op mode on Xbox, but the PC version was a different story.

"It turned out to be a really, insanely difficult problem to do this over a network (as opposed to doing something like split screen) which is why it's next to impossible to find a first-person action game that offers it on the PC," he says.

Of course, even if the developers have put co-op in the too-hard basket, a legion of modders is more than up to the challenge.

Sven Co-op (www.svencoop.com) has been in continuous development since 1999 for the original Half-Life, and in its various incarnation has had to deal with all sorts of odd errors thrown up by a game engine that once said co-op was "too hard".

For instance, if Half-Life tries to cache more than 512 sounds - all too possible in a monster-rich map - the engine will crash. But the Sven team has risen above these challenges to create a co-op experience in many ways richer than the original game.

Flow on effects from co-op include better monster AI, such as the ability for monsters to call allied medic units to heal team, and to spawn babies from fallen comrades - a feature intended for the original game that never made it in.

The bottom line is that co-op is something that takes time - Sven is five years old and still yet to come up with a definitive release, although the final 3.5 is expected soon - and in an industry where developers are pressured to churn out games as quickly as possible, there's just no room for gamers who want to play with their friends, not against them.



INDUSTRY WATCH

With Timothy C. Best

THE GAME VETERAN SHUFFLE

Acclaim looks like might be in serious trouble (like bankruptcy) if it can't find a wad of cash to replace a financing deal that expires any day now. Compounding its woes, not only did the long-standing publisher cop a quarterly loss of \$US25.4m, it's also being sued by the Olsen Twins for royalties. Ouch. Ouch times two. Meanwhile, embattled Midway is one step closer to being wholly owned by Viacom's chairman after he managed to scrounge up 80% of the shares. Speculators think he'll delist the

company to make it privately owned and then try sell it on to Viacom, a mega-corp that has been looking for a toe-hold in the games market. Moving from a veteran publisher to veteran development house, the Bellevue Sierra studio has been given its walking papers by Vivendi and will develop no more. You might remember the Sierra Studios from the adventure game heyday of Police Quest, King's Quest and Leisure Suit Larry. The studio had been working on the Hoyle series of card and puzzle games which might make it a

mercy killing, but it's still sad. Also closing its doors is Taldran, the developers of the Star Fleet Command series, doors after its ambitious Black9 lost its publisher. To keep the outgoing theme going, former level designer and project administrator Kenn Hoekstra has left his post at Raven Software, as has Raven's lead programmer Pat Lipo. Lipo's plans are secret, but Hoekstra is planning to have a go at screenwriting. Two ex-Rare developers plus an ex-Blue Tongue creative director have

teamed up for a new beginner of their own with Third Wave Games. Its first project will be a downloadable mech-combat game, World War, which they are planning to release at around \$30. Don't be fooled by the price or the download thing; there's a lot of experience there, so we'll have to see how their franchise-building goes. Finally, EA announced the cancellation of its new Ultima X: Odyssey game, making it the third major PC MMORPG to bite the dust in recent months.



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Sequel Fallout

BETHESDA GETS NUMBER 3. TIMOTHY C. BEST REPORTS FROM GROUND ZERO...



Fear not Fallout fans; number three is on the way. Sure, Black Isle isn't getting back together for the gig, but Bethesda, the RPG veterans behind Morrowind, will give it a decent go to say the least.

It has signed on the dotted line for the rights to not just this sequel but possible follow-up games for PC, consoles and handhelds, while Interplay keeps the intellectual property and the rights to a Fallout persistent world.

With the ink on the deal barely dry, Bethesda's Pete Hines says it's too early to make any big calls on their plans beyond saying they want to "capture what made Fallout such a great and memorable game".

"While it'll be a while before you hear from us again, on what we're up to with Fallout 3, once we are ready to talk we think we'll have something folks can be excited about, regardless of whether they played the original games or not," he says.

The announcement has caused quite a buzz from the RPG community, ranging from relief to outrage that Bethesda hasn't confirmed that the new game will be: 1) isometric, 2) use the SPECIAL system and 3) be turn-based.

Hines shrugs off the attention saying that the overwhelming majority of responses have been positive

and that: "The hardcore folks have simply been waiting for another Fallout game for a long time and have concerns about whether we're going to make a game that is true to the experience they know and love. We think we can and, once we're able to talk more about the game, hopefully they'll see that as well."

There are some things that we can glean about Fallout 3. For one we know that Bethesda can make an open-ended role-playing game. We also know that they have licensed the rights to the SPECIAL system, which means that they are at least thinking of using it, and Hines has stated that the game will keep its mature themes.

It's a safe bet that Bethesda won't skimp on the technology for this one and Hines says that, "More than anything, for its time it was a great, groundbreaking, game in terms of what it did graphically, with the atmosphere, setting, voice work, etc."

"We're excited about the chance to break new ground in all those same areas, while at the same time bringing back the experience that makes Fallout a game that people remember so fondly."

Since Fallout, and then its sequel in 1999, there was the action-heavy Fallout Tactics and the Brotherhood of Steel spin-offs for consoles, but it never reached the peak of Black Isle's SPECIAL RPGs and players still pined for the pair of games to become a trilogy. Then they were cruelly teased by fate (and Interplay's bank balance) when they found out that Black Isle was working on Fallout 3 when the studio was closed. Leaked pictures made it all that much harder to take.

When Interplay was forced from its offices, it looked like the series would go down with the ship, but through some fancy footwork the struggling publisher managed to get Fallout 3 back into production as well as what we can only guess was a healthy cash injection. With the news that Interplay has also managed to broker a deal between Vivendi and Atari meaning that it's D&D-related titles are getting distributed once more, there's even a glimmer of hope we might get to see the its massively multiplayer post nuclear role playing game which would surely be a mutant creation.

More Fallout as it comes to hand...

BEYOND THE DIGITAL CURTAIN

With Anthony Fordham

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: GAME OVER

I swear she was trying to eat my brain!

Okay, so, Singles: Flirt Up Your Life was great with the sex and all that, but I really wish I'd been able to beat on the chick in the game, you know? That would have been cool.

Thankfully, no less an august authority than the Czech Republic's actual Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has commissioned Centauri

Productions to create a game for the wife-beater in all of us. Apparently, the game forms part of the information campaign directed AGAINST domestic violence, presumably by employing the same idea GTA3 subscribes to: let them do it on the PC and they'll be less likely to do it in real life.

Just like Singles, a pair of sims live in a poorly

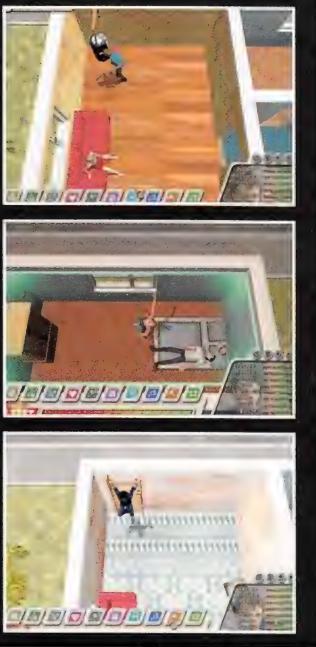
furnished apartment and must figure out how to deal with the fact that there's no money to buy nicer things. Consider the following question: Your partner wants to go to the movies but there's no money. Do you a) say there's no money or b) hit her. If you answered "a" then congratulations, you've just won a round of Domestic Violence: Game Over.

Need more convincing? Consider this quote from Ruda Setula, credited on the website as a man in the trade: "I like the simulation of the bed. I haven't got one like that at home."

That's a comment from an expert that is. But an expert at what, Centauri? Wife-beating? Honestly, I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried.

WHY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: GAME OVER FREAKS ME OUT

- Tries to fool you into hitting your partner
- Screenshots suggest rack-like torture is an option
- Comes recommended by convicted wife-beaters
- Game design means you can never win



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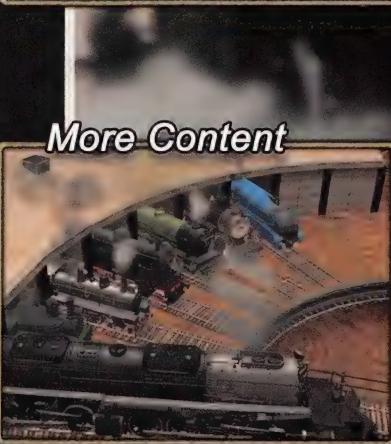
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AURAN



ATARI APOLOGY

In PCPP#102 we made mention of missing the Atari booth at E3 due to Atari not organizing an appointment. It transpires that this was not in fact the case. We regret the comments we made on page 44 and would like to extend an apology to Atari's Australian PR representative. Sorry, mate!

All Hail the Little Guy!

PC GAMING WOULD BE HOMOGENISED TOP 10 PAP IF IT WASN'T FOR SMALL DEVELOPERS AND DISTRIBUTORS, AS ANTHONY FORDHAM DISCOVERS...



Sure, you bought Warcraft 3. You'll buy Doom 3 as well, not to mention Half Life 2, GTA San Andreas (assuming it comes out for PC... yeah, course it will), Battlefield 2, whatever the next Age Of happens to be the age of, and any other major PC gaming release because they're all great games.

So, that's Christmas taken care of, what about the rest of the year? How will you pass your time? Get a console? Play one of the many other stellar releases from the major distributors? You must be joking. As the consoles get a firmer and firmer grip on the industry, shelf space and release schedules alike are shrinking for PC games. Movie and TV tie-ins as well as the odd second-tier title from the big players are pretty much all you can expect...

...except for all the stuff from the independent distributors and developers. If you're willing to take a gamble, or just desperate for something out of the ordinary, companies like Auran, Red Ant and QV Software are your best hope. And Australian independent developers like Panther Games are keeping the good ol' days of PC gaming alive.

Despite their best efforts developing a hard core WW2 strategy game, just like there used to be back in the early 90s, Panther president Dave O'Conner says the company finds it hard to get shelf space. The Top 10 dominates, and retailers want games to shift huge volumes in the early weeks. There's waning interest in slow sellers like Panther's own Highway to the Reich.

"It used to be you could put a title on the shelf and leave it there for months. But nowadays, retailers want games that sell big numbers in the first couple of weeks and can then be taken off the shelf to make space for the next blockbuster," he says.

Of course, Highway is a hard core title that would only be played by PC nerds, but Panther believes - and early sales figure support this - that there is still a significant audience for this kind of game out there in PC land.

"We've basically abandoned the idea of retail in North America and we're switching to an online distribution method, with direct download," he says.



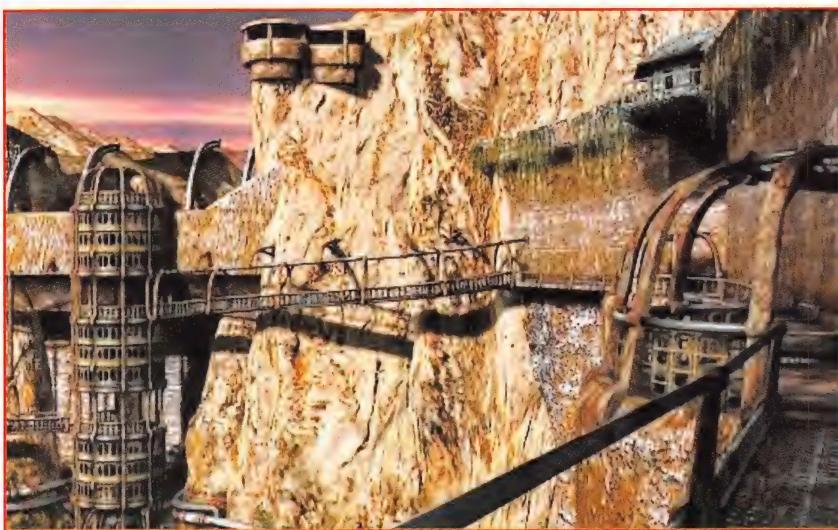
THE BEST GAME YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED #8 GIANTS: CITIZEN KABUTO

Giants is a light hearted, genre hopping action game made by everyone's favourite crazy developers, Planet Moon. It's broken up into 3 parts, with one a team based shooter, another a third person sort of action-RPG and well the third part is very different. You play as the giant Kabuto and you stomp on or eat a lot of people. The cut scenes are light hearted and very funny and the in-game action comes hard and fast. It scored good reviews and has even graced PCPP's coveted top 100. But Strangely the game didn't sell well and would soon grace the bargain bins where I would find this gem. Maybe it was the high system reqs or maybe people just aren't after games that are very far out?

Chris James

Do you have a favourite obscure game? Send your 100 word submission to letters@pcpowerplay.com.au with the game title in the subject line.





THE LONGEST JOURNEY

If you want a perfect example of independent distributors making sure Australians get access to more quality games than the big guns are prepared to consider, look no further than Funcom's *The Longest Journey*. In an age where adventure games seemed like a dead end, where everyone was developing a next generation console or an MMORPG, TLJ combined a decent story, adult concepts (lesbians as real people! Eeeek!) and some fairly decent graphics to create one of the best adventure games since PCs started being able to use more than 256 colours. It was released in 1999, did well in Europe, and then it, like all games, passed on. Except that Australians had yet to play it. It wasn't until it was brought into the country in 2002 - that's three years late - that we got out mitts on it. Thank the gods of gaming for independent distributors.

Fortunately the Australian distributor Red Ant is strongly supporting the title, and the game is readily available in many shops here.

"We're seeing in Europe especially that PC games are being squeezed off the shelf. I think in a year or so you won't see anything except the top ten PC games on retail shelves in this country too," says O'Conner.

Of course, O'Conner has been savagely burned by retail before. The one time he tried to break out of his company's role as a producer of quality strategy titles with second-to-none AI, his game Alien Drug Lords found itself pilloried on early 90s current affairs program *The Investigators* as a corrupting influence on children.

"It was an adventure about fighting the galactic drug trade. Unfortunately, we called it Alien Drug Lords. The Investigators didn't even take the shrink-wrap off, they just assumed kids would get addicted to drugs from playing this game. Shops refused to stock it," says O'Conner.

Independent Australian distributors Auran and QV Software have a cheerier view of the future of PC gaming retail in this country.

"PC gaming will never die. It's facing stiff competition from the consoles at the moment, but I think it will always be there," says Auran director and co-founder Graham Edelsten.

Auran broke onto the scene with its "Cowboys and Indians in space" RTS Dark Reign. After unpleasant licensing experiences, the company took a break from the mainstream and instead developed the ultra-niche Trainz model railroad simulator. The game was a massive success, building an enviably large online community for such an inexpensive project. But once again, distributors were unwilling to pick up the game for sale.

"We ran into difficulty getting Trainz on store shelves, because it's not the kind of thing retailers are

used to. They thought a railroad game wouldn't sell, but now they see that there is an important niche for the title," says Edelsten.

Auran decided to distribute the game itself, and following Trainz's success, the company branched out into distributing games from other developers.

"We look for titles that have a hardcore following but aren't of interest to the big players. For instance, Hearts of Iron sold 4000 copies, which is great for Australia. But that game would never have been distributed here if it wasn't for us," says Edelsten.

Sydney-based QV Software also distributes games that otherwise wouldn't have been seen in Australia. Co-owner Paul Eliot says the company originally started as a distributor of educational software and flight simulators.

"We branched into games because we wanted a third arm to the company, plus I'm a huge gamer myself," he says.

QV Software has agreements with several small European publishers whose games are in demand from a niche Australian audience.

"We have an excellent relationship with The Adventure Company, which is one of the only developers doing adventure games these days. We brought in games like Schism and *The Longest Journey* which other distributors had refused. They sold great," he says.

One of QV Software's biggest success stories is the horseracing management game Sport of Kings.

"I didn't think it would do well but my partner insisted there was a market for it. To this day it continues to sell solidly," says Eliot.

"The bottom line is that without companies like Auran, you wouldn't get to play all these great games that are overlooked by the big publishers," says Edelsten.



FREESPACE 3000A

In a post on a games forum, Derek Smart (Ph.D), the infamous developer of the Battlecruiser series, has admitted he is chasing the Freespace license from Interplay. "This is something I am seriously considering, given that it looks like Interplay has started off loading properties (starting with *Fallout 3*)," said Smart. "I mean, just think. Would you rather see this legacy license fall into the wrong hands?"





HOTWARE

All the bits that we cram in at the last moment with Anthony Fordham



USB AQUARIUM

Price: \$30 **Distributor:** Think Geek
Contact: www.thinkgeek.com

It's great to see people making the most of the wonderful connectivity technology we have available today. USB mug warmers, USB mousepads, USB shoe polishers and now, what we always wanted, a USB aquarium.

This is what you get if you're one of those cheap parents who won't spend \$2000 and a lifetime of maintenance on a marine aquarium for your Nemo-obsessed youngster. This teeny magneto-fishological tank uses the principles of MAGNETIC RESONANCE and CHEAP PLASTIC to bring you two plastic fish who wiggle around more or less randomly.

What sets it apart from the slew of similar tanks is that it's powered not by two AA batteries (not included) but rather your USB port. And what better way to make use of a spare port. Entertaining for children, the young at heart, and creepy cannibal guys obsessed with that elf-chick from Everquest.



LIFE! NOTEBOOK BAGS

Price: Varies **Distributor:** Myer, Megamart and Dicksmith **Contact:** www.lifegetfunked.com.au

Ownning a laptop is great... until you drop it, split the screen in half, and end up with an oversized, misshapen discus. Which is where a nice padded carry bag can be handy. Sadly, even though you've just forked out the deposit for a small home on your new portable deck of PC bliss, most laptops don't come with one. Surely laptop bags can't be that expensive, you think to yourself. Until you head out to purchase

one, and realise that you could buy a cheap PC for the price of a faux leather jobby. Not anymore though. This is the Life! No, seriously. The Life! range of bags are designed to safely transport your expensive gadgety things such as cameras, PCs and MP3 players. Choose Life! and you'll find that these bags are the perfect mobile home for your expensive gear; they look great, have lots of fluffy padding, and don't cost the Earth.

CMTECH CA-C90 COLOUR MP3 PLAYER

Price: \$450 **Distributor:** mStation **Contact:** www.mstation.com.au

Since it looks like Apple has "ruled out" a movie-player iPod (read: we're pissed off that you guessed our next move so we're going to delay it for a year) I guess we'll have to look elsewhere for the next generation of funky portable devices with colour screens.

Enter the CA-C90. Okay, so it doesn't go the whole hog and give us movie playback - it is after all, only a 256MB or 512MB solid-state player. But you can

display your saucy pictures on it, and show them to members of the opposite sex at appropriate times. It also plays games - Die Hard and Break Ice at this stage - although the company does advise that the long-awaited Poko will be available soon. Like, whatever.

You can also use it as an E-book, squinting at tiny text as you rocket toward Akihabara on the bullet-train. You J-rocker, you.





INFOCUS SCREENPLAY 777

Price: \$49,999 **Distributor:** Infocus **Contact:** www.au.infocushome.com

Sorry, what? FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS? Did you really say fifty thousand dollars? It must be a typo. Surely you mean \$5000. No? You really really mean \$50K? That's incredible. Naturally, since this projector is worth more than my life I haven't actually played with one. But you can rest assured that for this price it would want to be freaking amazing. Perhaps we're paying for the techno stingray look? Maybe, at this price, it actually takes off, flies around on tiny ducted fan engines and

rains electric death on your enemies? Inside the beast are three Mustang HD2+, native 720p high-definition DMDs by Texas Instruments, making the unit allegedly similar to pro digital projectors found in all good cinemas. It "sets the benchmark" in home cinema display, apparently. However, it should be remembered that for this price you can buy two Nissan Pulsars. And not the bog standard model, either. You can get extras.

HONDA CIVIC HYBRID

Price: From \$30,000 **Distributor:** Honda **Contact:** www.hondacars.com

It's a sad fact but most of the hybrid cars so far on the market have had a kind of weird Astroboy-except-with-wheels look which doesn't exactly scream "FUNK ME" to all the chicks as you tool down Burwood Road on a Thursday night with your R&B pumpin'. Enter the Civic Hybrid. Car-heads the world



over know and respect the Civic as a modest car with enough space under the hood to stick a whole bunch of stupidly powerful after-market upgrades in order to make it go, well, fast. You won't be doing too much upgrading to the engine of this one, although body-kit upgrades and pulsating under-body grape neon is still yours if you want it. The Hybrid uses, duh, a hybrid petrol-electric engine to achieve what is now, apparently completely unironically, called "advanced technology partial zero emissions". I guess that means that MOST OF THE TIME the vehicle has zero emissions. Hey, guess what, my 1996 Subaru Liberty also has zero emissions most of the time - when it's parked in the garage. Oh wait, does a worrying leak in the rear diff count?

MERIDIAN COLOUR GPS VALUE PACK

Price: \$1,499 **Distributor:** Magellan **Contact:** www.magellangps.com.au

Get your GPS value pack while the offer stands! GPS is undoubtedly the funnest techno-thing since a generation of 19 year old girls discovered they could make money with their webcams.

The Magellan Meridian Colour is especially funky because it tells you where you are and where you're going by the use of bright, easily identified colours such as orange, red, blue and chartreuse.

The value pack, shown here, gives you the GPS unit (obviously), a CD of Australian maps, a 64MB SD card, a mounting bracket for the dash

of your Range Rover or Subaru Outback (actually for any car, I'm just making a statement about the kind of people who have GPSs), a cigarette lighter 12V adapter and the evocatively named "BONUS mobile phone aquapac." What is a mobile phone aquapac? Buy the GPS and find out...



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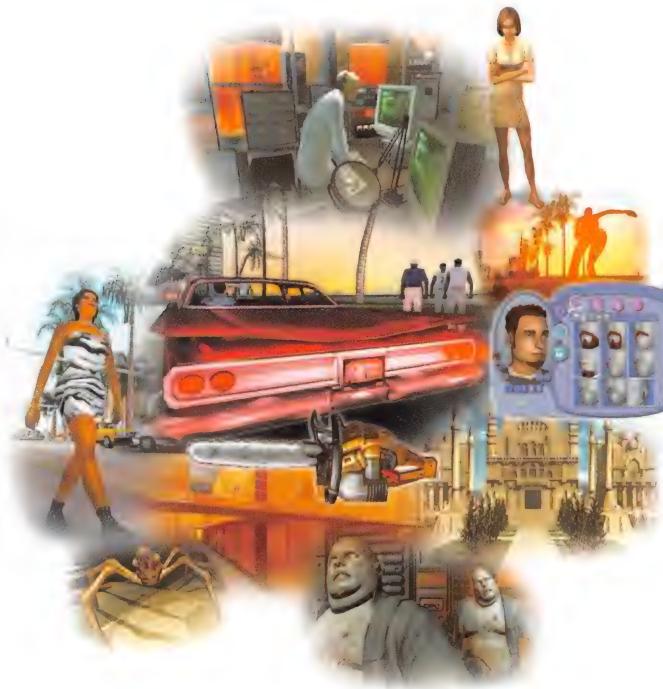
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OUT TO PLAY Timothy C. Best

Reel to Unreal, Plus One Angry Elf



I've just had a chance to fire up Relic's Warhammer 40K multiplayer beta and I'm having a whale of a time. Back in high-school I used to play the table top game and the Eldar, and their red-handed god, always rocked my socks. Relic's game brings the Avatar to life with such heat that it makes me chant "Bloody Handed-God" like a cult-i-fied psycho. That's what I want to write about.

What I should write about is completely different. There's this parliamentary report called "From Reel to Unreal: Future opportunities for Australia's film, animation, special effects and electronic games industries", which, despite all odds gives an overview of the Oz industry in a way that I've been trying to do for years.

As far as I can see there's only one fair thing to do: cover the report, but to drop in as many inappropriate references to a flaming uber-unit as possible.

So here goes:

Normally, I wouldn't dream of getting down and dirty with parliamentary report – unless I was guest lecturing at an insomnia ward – but this one is freakish (like me enjoying a cheesy RTS super unit). It sounds like it was written by people who actually like games.

Before you get out of the foreword you'll read that game "companies need more support from local financiers in an industry that, in comparison with film, makes more business sense but is less glamorous."

Do you have any idea how fond the Australian government is about promoting culture through film? Putting aside all the film-specific grants, let's just say that there are currently seven separate tax incentives that investors can get for suitably Aussie films and none of them apply to games.

Trivia of the day: out of the 169 films invested in by the Film Finance Corporation Australia, only 8 have made a profit, with Rabbit Proof Fence and Lantana likely to make nine and ten.

The foreword goes on to say that tax payers want to see more bang for their buck and that film spending will likely come under more scrutiny, while, conversely, the games industry has grown with little government support by

There are seven separate tax incentives that investors can get for suitably Aussie films and none of them apply to games

making games with audience appeal.

If you think artistic merit would be a sticking point, the report later says that games take Australian culture to Australian and other audiences and that "until more compelling evidence emerges of harm beyond what occurs in other areas of recreation, it appears that there are real social and cultural benefits from the game industry."

There's a strange tone of surprise (like the tone of the message I got as I fended off attacks on one front while my Avatar single-handedly destroyed my opponent's base on another) to the assessment of how well the games industry is going.

Apparently, in 2002, it made \$110m, with \$100m coming from exports and the report says: "Any industry that is competitive in the world market without government subsidy must be trading off significant competitive advantages. Austrade noted that these included low development costs, a high skill level, and content that has 'a uniqueness that appeals across all cultures.'"

The only real hole that it saw in the industry was that we're still America's bitch. That might be a paraphrase. Apparently, since the mid 1990s the US's biggest export has been intellectual property and the merchandise that goes with it. If they own the rights, they are happy to have cheap labour make the games or little plastic dolls.

When Ratbag developed Dirt Track Racing in 1999, and then Dirt Track Racing Sprint Cars a year later, it received the \$370,000 development money in exchange for the intellectual property rights. According to the report, if Ratbag had been able to self-fund the game it would have received three times the \$800,000 it actually pulled down. That's just from game sales, without rights to sequels or merchandising to consider. Of course, it would never have been able to afford to make the thing in the first place, so there-in lies the rub.

Except in the case of the Wiggles, and maybe Hi-5 and Bananas in Pyjamas, Aussies just don't take

advantage of our own IP, even when we keep it.

Name one Australian game character you can buy on a T-shirt (come on Ty, you can do it).

To build iconic IP and keep it, you need start-up money or well-informed investors, and the report says that fewer, but bigger budget Australian games would help as well.

What's more annoying is that the committee couldn't find any evidence of any Aussie game ever being made from an Australian book or film, although it got an example of a missed chance. According to one submission, Ratbag was approached to do a game of an unannounced Aussie action movie with a big star, but the deal fell through when the producer found that investments in games didn't garner the same 100% tax deduction that grace Aussie films. What's cool about this wacky committee is that it recommends that games get that deduction even though they have bugger all authority to make comment on tax issues.

Heck, get it out there like an Eldar War Diety, I say.

I've only grabbed the grand conclusions of the report, but there is an awful lot of overview stuff in there as well. Which countries buy games, comparative production costs for the US and Oz, the problems that face our industry, grants that developers might get in on, recommendations that games need agencies that mirror bodies like AUSfilm, and even how the biz is apparently concentrated (50% in Victoria, 40% in Queensland) is all there.

Anyone who's interested can find the whole beast here: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cita/film/report.htm>

Keep in mind that this report was commissioned by the then IT Minister who implied that broadband was for porn and to help his kids play games. Ch-ch-ch-changes....

Anyhoo, I have to gather 1030 power and 865 requisition points, I've got a date with a fiery red-head...

Timothy C. Best is a senior writer at PC PowerPlay. He's played more games than Baby John Burgess but doesn't look quite as good with a moustache.

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Riddle of the Sphinx is one of the best games in it's Genre and has received very high reviews. Riddle of the Sphinx is a point and click adventure that will keep you busy trying to solve the mystery of the Egyptians.

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Virtual Skipper 2 is one of the best sailing simulations around on the market and now at a budget price of \$19.95 it is even better value.

War Commander:

War Commander is a highly detailed and immersive RTS game set in WW2, with many missions to complete, do you have what it takes to win the battles? Awesome value at this new budget price.

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Ever wanted to make your own music, be a DJ? Well, with this new title in our Wanted Range, you can, and very easily! Comes with thousands of sounds, videos and riffs to make it easy to become a star mixer!

Blitzkrieg:

This is where the Blitzkrieg series all started! A RTS with something a bit extra and gameplay that will have you hooked for hours. It represents amazing value at the Wanted Range budget price point.



TECH TALK Jason Brown

Two party preferred

Are you a swinging voter? Do you genuinely compare and contrast the offers, promises, and opportunities presented by our esteemed lawmakers? Are you a Labor supporter because your daddy was? A Holden fan because Ford fans got pummelled on the school bus? Cat or dog? Chocolate or chips? FPS or RTS? Deep down, we all know that it's best to look around, and see what we can get out of a particular product before we lend it our support. We should weigh up the pros and cons, do a SWOT analysis, consult the magic 8 ball, or use whatever other logical decision making process we have to ensure we're backing the right horse.

Well it amazes me that people get that, but rarely put it into practice. Someone asked me recently what CPU they should upgrade to as part of their Localised Entertainment Expansion Technology Development Plan (LEETDP). I suggested an AMD XP product in line with their current fiscal budgetary surplus, and was surprised by the response, 'Ooh, they're no good for games though are they?'

If you can see the absurdity of the comment above, you'd probably enjoy commentating on the antics that play out during question-time. You probably also believed that PC gaming Joe has at least some inkling of a shred of a clue. But there's still a lot of people out there who either don't care, or maybe just don't get it.

You may be able to proudly claim the title of swinger, but there's still a heap of mindless lemmings running round out there. Lemmings that stick with whatever made a positive impression on their psyche during their early encounters with technology. Lemmings that cling to product lines that were winners a decade ago. Though chances are, if you're reading this then you're probably, hopefully, not one of them, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have relevance for you.

Like our political system, we



When they choose item A or item B, they're not just buying a product, they're casting a vote for the next generation

almost always have two very strong contenders in each domain of our techware, both of which are constantly seeking your vote of confidence. Intel and AMD, nVidia and ATI, DVD+ and DVD-, Optus and Telstra, Microsoft and Mike Rowe Soft, etc. However, we vote in a different way. It's a task, trundling down to the local CWA hall to fill in that little blue slip. Dodging the crowds and avoiding those unwashed hopefuls who want to rub shoulders with you. Hopeful because they're thinking that some of your Rexona might rub off on them, that is. But that's a small price to pay for blah, blah, Advance Australia fair, blah, blah, etc.

But it's nowhere near the cost I fork over when I cast a vote right into my technology providers' pockets. People forget that when they choose item A or item B, they're not just buying a product, they're casting a vote for the next generation of that company's lineup. You're saying, 'Hey, you're on the right track, have another

term,' regardless of whether they've lived up to the true definition of improvement.

Now that's not necessarily a bad thing, but when a large number of constituents are casting donkey votes, using the 'Devil that you know' mentality, that can affect what discerning punters like you and I get to play with in the future.

So what's the solution? Could we rid the tech-world of two party preferred competitive behaviour? Call it a plutocracy, monarchy, oligarchy, anarchy or any other old malarkey? While you might get a slightly better product, the cost increase associated with that near monopoly would be distasteful. And like all kingdoms, some dissidents would eventually swarm the palace and trash it.

But that hasn't stopped company X from trying to take the crown (Guess whom, don't sue'm). Last year it cut deals with several game developers as part of a high profile campaign. The mechanics of the arrangement were more sinister

than just plopping a splash screen at the front of games. Some deals led to certain games being beta-tested exclusively on company X's hardware, and I'm sure you get the implication of that!

The same group recently had another stab, though it slipped mostly under the radar. They took an up and coming games developer under their wing, and ensured that the final version of the game only worked exclusively on their hardware. Of course the older, more compatible variant of the game, which looked cack in comparison, was used as the baseline for comparison purposes. Perhaps they chose a low profile game so that if it erupted, the damage could be contained, and judging by the hate mail accounts that were set up as a result, that was probably clever. Luckily, they never jagged HL2, or Doom3.

When you're choosing your next bit of kit, remember that successful governments are made up of a multitude of portfolios, and with all aspects subject to evaluation in order to rate their success. For a manufacturer to use such underhanded tactics is inexcusable, and should have the same repercussions as something like the Children Overboard affair. And it's you and I that make the difference, to ensure qualitative improvements in the future as well as quantitative. Don't ignore articles or discussions because they concern products from a different camp, and let's ensure we take a holistic and unbiased approach to our decision making. And remember, you're sending a message for all of us, and every vote counts!

Jason Brown was conceived in a petrie dish in the laboratory of an inner city telephone exchange. When not talking tech in these very pages he can be found translating impenetrable Taiwanese hardware manuals into English while being nourished intravenously by optic fibres carrying electrolyte.



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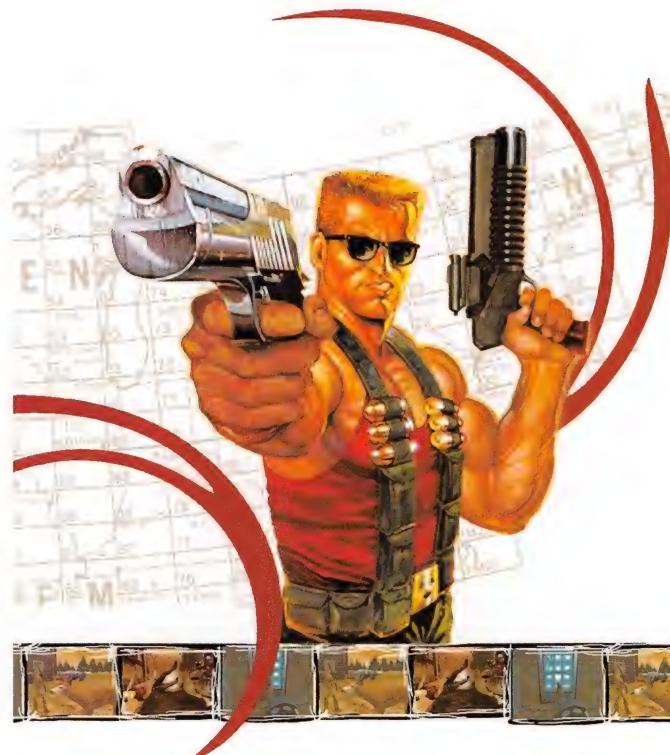
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THE GUERRILLA GAMER

Sociopathic



It's realistic that guards wouldn't want to put their hands all over a cheap hussy

So, rape huh? Pretty entertaining stuff, I'm sure you'd agree. Fun, even. And since rape is so fun and you know, healthy, it's great to know that there's a MMORPG currently in beta testing where rape is more or less encouraged by the kind of press the developer is hungrily seeking.

At first glance Sociolotron (www.sociolotron.com), looks like a fairly pig-ugly pretender to Ultima Online. A sprite-based, forced-perspective dungeon hack where PKing rules and roleplaying is something your little brother does in his sweaty bedroom with his Year 8 mates.

But it turns out that in order to attract people to its ugly, bog-standard game, developer Socioltronics has included detailed rape-modelling. There's other stuff too, but the rape is the main draw card.

A major tech-fetish mag from the States published an admirably level-headed exposé of the game and its peccadilloes, and managed to get a whole bunch of players to yabber on about how they really liked getting raped, well, maybe not at first, but afterwards, you know, when they realised the guy raping them was really hot and the "loss of control" was really sexy. Which is the way all rape victims react in real life.

Fortunately, this is not a level-headed exposé of Sociolotron. This is an opinion column, where I get to rant with froth-mouthed intensity about how this game has finally crossed my famously flexible line.

Various and sundry blogs have written about how amazing Sociolotron is and how it's really pushing back the barriers of human expression and really letting people live out their darkest fantasies. They carry on about how because everyone in the game is a "consenting adult" - whatever the hell that's supposed to mean in real life - it's therefore very hard to take any kind of moral stance on Sociolotron's grotesque rape-modelling and female domination rituals.

To which I reply: just watch me.

Now, I'm not the kind of guy to get all uppity about the hooker-bashing in the unadulterated version of GTA3 because it wasn't as if the developers wrote in the manual about how you could sleep with hookers and then kill them to get your money back. That unfortunate aspect of the game came about because of the power of the freeform gameplay dynamic. In Sociolotron by contrast, you more or less have a rape button.

Popping over to the website, we find a detailed list of the "skills" a character can develop. These include such concepts as Prostitution which, naturally, gives you a bonus against attacking monsters of "low moral" (Freudian sic) because they will, for some reason, want to spare a pro while concentrating their rape-claws on a priest. So a hooker becomes a "formidable back row fighter."

Similarly, while in game-prison for pushing the rape button too many times, prostitutes can smuggle things in and out more easily because

guards are less diligent about searching them. Because, you know, it's realistic that guards wouldn't want to put their hands all over a cheap hussy with a drug conviction.

Further down the page we find that each character is governed by "urges" which - and this is killer - sometimes take over, leaving the AI to completely control your character for up to five minutes. Urges include Sado, Maso, Exhibitionism, General Sex and Reproduction. I bet that makes for some fun gameplay - watching your character automatically rape another character who is automatically screaming "rape me rape me" because their Maso urge just kicked in. Leaves both hands free, after all.

Hang on, Exhibitionism? "On higher levels, the genitals must also be exposed in order to raise the skill and the satisfaction." Right, thanks for that.

Now, it's possible to argue that all these aspects of humanity do exist in

real life and that it's very avant-garde of Sociolotron to model them as part of its massively detailed game. But I think it's telling that the Prostitution skill gets about 500 words of description on the website while Observation gets three lines.

While not out turning tricks, there are some other professions available in the game. Namely Blacksmith, Electronics, Tailor, Chef, Carpenter and Biochemist. The latter might seem the odd one out, but think again. Who else is going to make the drugs?

So it's pretty easy to see that behind all the intellectual crap about Sociolotron's brave new direction, what the game basically does is create a grotty little world in which masturbators can practice their most favourite skill.

"But Guerrilla! Just because someone is a serial rapist with more than 300 notches on his rape-belt doesn't make him a rapist in real life!" I hear you cry.

To which I reply, that may well be true, but as little as I like living with a flatmate who cackles wildly every time he gets a headshot in Soldier of Fortune II, I like even less the idea of living in a house with someone who spends hours in their bedroom beating off as they repeatedly (and repetitively - this is a hell-typical MMORPG, remember) try to rape girls from the US. Or at least, what they think are girls.

Still, if it means being able to raise Oratory to the fabled 100 level so you can get an automatic Not Guilty verdict from the NPC members of the jury in your 200th rape trial, far be it for me to try and stop you.

shudders

The Guerrilla Gamer is a veteran PC gaming journalist who feels he has taken enough crap from independent developers who think they're pushing some kind of envelope. If he had his way, every game on the shelf would be a version of Pacman, except where the Ghosts hug Pacman instead of killing him. And it would be rated MA15+.

GOOD MORNING PANZERS



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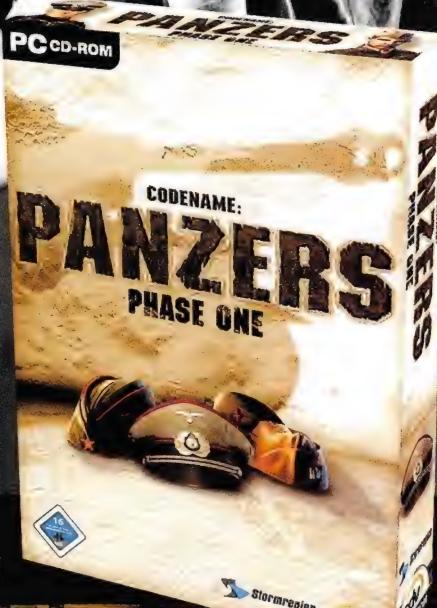
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DEVELOPER DIARY

Tribes Vengeance

Designer Diary #1

Well ... I could fill this first diary with the introduction of who I am, the company background, etc. Trust me, you can read all that on our web page (<http://www.irrationalgames.com>) or in numerous other interviews. What you want to know about is the GAME.

Tribes: Vengeance is the next iteration in the popular online multiplayer Tribes franchise. If you don't know what Tribes is all about, go Google it up (or head to <http://www.tribes.sierra.com/>). When you DO know what Tribes is about, prepare to flex your mind, because we're taking the game to some very new places ... and that's what I'd like these developer diaries to be about.

For a start, Tribes: Vengeance has got a single player campaign. Not just some tacked on tutorial missions, an honest-to-god campaign, with a great story, interesting characters, fun gameplay, the whole kitten-caboodle. Since that's the section I'm primarily responsible for (as well as the overall design of the whole game) I thought I'd kick off this Dev Diary with some of the challenges we're tackling in creating a coherent, polished and, above all, FUN single player game out of what started out as multi player mechanics.

Single Player Mission Structure

So how do you create a mission structure for a single player campaign? We had our brief from Sierra - create a series of fun missions with plenty of "wow" moments, tied together by an interesting story.

Analysis

Before we can start, we need to understand what kind of game we're making. I'd previously played a fair amount of Tribes 1, but only a little of Tribes 2. During the period where we were still pitching to do Tribes: Vengeance, I played more Tribes than I ever had. Primarily, we were playing Tribes 1, and then later on Sierra gave us a bunch of free licences to Tribes 2, and once a week many members of the studio would log on and battle it out.

The point of all of this game playing was not to have fun (although we did), but to gain a better understanding about the mechanics. During this time, we were also thinking about possible additions to the game, and cruising the forums to see what the community felt was good/bad/missing. I began compiling a list of gameplay "tools" that we'd have at our disposal.

All of this research was compiled into the first draft of the design document, which formed the basis for the Prototype as well as the final product.

Brainstorming

At the same time we were playing a bunch of Tribes, we started having

meetings to discuss the kinds of "wow" moments (or set-pieces, if you like) that we'd like to see in a first person action game. Anyone who had an idea came along, and all ideas were heard. Inspiration for these kinds of things tended to come from all over - movies, books, other games, being dropped on the head too much as a child. But there were also ideas inspired by the things you can only do in Tribes.

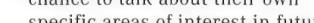
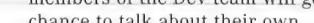
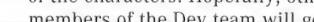
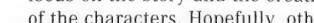
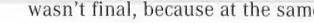
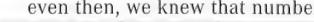
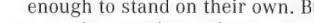
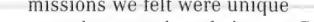
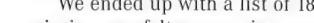
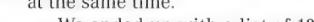
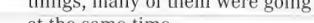
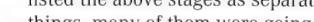
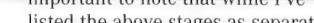
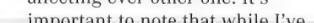
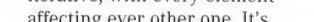
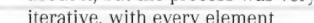
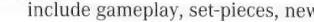
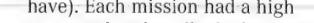
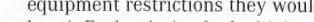
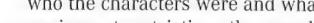
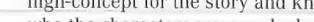
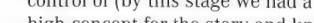
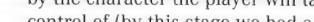
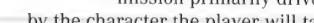
A big list of possible set-pieces was generated, at this stage without any real thought about the feasibility in terms of engine or budget. This tends to be the really relaxed and fun part of the project, where you don't have to worry about such constraints. That all comes crashing down later on ...

Progression

Once we had a relatively stable idea of the gameplay we'd be supporting (including the weapons, vehicles and other equipment) we started plotting out how those different elements would be "released" to the player over the duration of the campaign. This means we have to make sure that we're not swamping the player in the first few missions, but also that with every mission there's something new to learn and play with.

Mission High Concepts

So we had all this information, and it was time to combine it together into the first pass at our structure for the campaign. We divided the progression into missions, with each



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REFRESH

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Dreamfall

THE SEQUEL TO THE LONGEST JOURNEY TAUTOLOGISES OUR MINDS



In a reflection of PC gaming's primary audience, we rarely get the chance to play as a female protagonist unless she has large breasts and the game is playable one-handed. Except when it comes to adventure games, that is. In which case it's likely that not only are you playing as a female character but you - the player - actually have large breasts as well.

I'm joking, of course.

Dreamfall is Funcom's long-awaited follow-up to *The Longest Journey*, perhaps the most well-received, by critics and players alike, traditional adventure games in years. Its success can largely be attributed to the charms of its main character, April Ryan, and of its fictional worlds, Stark and Arcadia, through which Ragnar Tornquist's narrative vision was realised in vivid and intriguing fashion.

Curiously, whilst Funcom has retained the parallel world scenario (and added a third, an icy landscape known as The Winter) and continued April's tale (while adding two new playable characters: Zoe, a 19 year old uni drop-out, and Kiam, a sword-swinging Arcadian mercenary), the Norwegian developer has apparently departed from the original's traditional point-and-click style. Instead, this is –



adventure purists inhale sharply – an action adventure!

Not only that, but it's – whisper it – coming to consoles...

God clearly hates PC gamers now. At least, that's the insane conclusion reached by many a frequenter of gaming forums on the Interweb. I reckon they probably used the phrase "dumbed down" at some point.

Yet Funcom is quick to reassure all and sundry that a direct control method and the introduction of some action elements does not need to equate to simplification or stupidity. Indeed, trad adventuring can be very stupid all by itself – see page 81 for ample proof. What it does mean for the designers is more varied tasks and more interesting situations with which to test the player.

We'll let you know the truth of the matter once we get our hands on playable code. - DW

Developer: Funcom ■ Publisher: TBC ■ Distributor: TBC ■ Due: 2005

NEW SHOTS!



DUNGEON SIEGE 2

THERE'S SOME KICK LEFT IN THIS OLD DONKEY

Developer: Gas Powered Games
Publisher: Microsoft
Distributor: Microsoft
Due: 2005



The Sims 2

WANNA BE BIG BROTHER?

In the face of 10 gazillion Sims expansion packs, it can be hard convincing people that The Sims 2 has us genuinely excited. But we are! The Sims have made the move to full-3D, the immersion factor has tripled, and the focus is more on fulfilling your Sims' aspirations as opposed to commanding them to use the toilet or clean the mountain of refuse out of their living room. Yes, your Sims now have goals in life: fame, fortune, knowledge, romance and family. This is what you now concentrate on, as your Sims will look after their own bodily functions and human necessities as they go

from toddler to teenager to creaky old adult - with you, the player, directly controlling the major events in their lives until their death.

The simple fact that Simsville will now be overflowing with teenagers, complete with out-of-control hormones (and their own unique social options in the menu), means you're guaranteed some hilariously memorable sequences.

You'll also be able to make "home movies" of your Sims in action and edit them later to pass onto your friends. Will we see a new era of Machinima Sims films? You bet. - EF



Developer: Maxis ■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Due: September

Everquest 2

WE'RE NOT IN NORRATH ANY MORE, DOROTHY



Making Everquest 2 must be like trying to make chocolate taste better. In any case, the game has headed into beta testing, so it shouldn't be long before we're all officially having a nibble. The game is set 500 years in the future, in a parallel universe to the original Everquest. If the player chooses to start as an evil race, their game will begin in a different city (Freeport) to the players who choose to be good (Qeynos). All players start out as a commoner at level 1 and can try out each of the varying archetypes before committing to one (Fighter, Mage, Priest, Scout) when they hit level 3. Each archetype then

branches out into three different classes, one of which you will choose at level 10. Those classes then branch out into subclasses, allowing for plenty of variation between characters.

What sounds like another addictive addition to the game is the idea of player reputation and prestige. Depending on your actions and how much success you've had in the game, low-level enemies may turn from you in fear and NPCs might seek you out after having heard about your exploits. Housing options for players will also be available from the very start. Everquest 2 is still on track to release late this year. - EF

Developer: Maxis ■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Due: September

FIRST LOOK!



PRO EVOLUTION
SOCCER 4



NOW WITH ADDED
OFFICIAL TEAMS!
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Konami
Distributor: Atari
Due: November

World of WarCraft

STILL NO WORD ON A LOCAL SERVER...

The World of WarCraft beta test has been well under way for some time now, so the land of Azeroth has been overrun with Humans, Dwarves, Gnomes, Night Elves and more. Players will have been experiencing what it's like to be a ghost - when you die, you take on a spirit form and get about the place as a spectre before eventually choosing to reclaim your body. Seems you have to move fast to avoid an untimely death, so luckily there are a huge number of mounts to wrangle. Get about on the backs of Wolves, Rams, Horses, Nightsabers, Mechano-Striders (a bit like Chocobos), Raptors, Undead Steeds, and even a whole array of flying creatures such as the Gryphon, Hippogryph, Wyvern and Vampire Bat! Interestingly, the beta test currently allows players to attack and kill NPCs of a differing faction, and Blizzard are also encouraging players to settle their differences through duels!

The new Talents system also means players will be unlocking custom skills from a branching tree of powers, adding a lot more depth to character progression and customisation. World of WarCraft continues to get tweaked as a solid release date gets even closer on the horizon. - EF



Developer: Blizzard ■ Publisher: Vivendi ■ Distributor: Vivendi ■ Due: TBC

Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault

REINVENTING ONLINE PLAY



In the light of Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault's newly revealed multiplayer mode, Invader, we're starting to get the impression that this will be the best all-round Medal of Honor package to make it to PC. The development of the Invader multiplayer mode is being headed up by Ed Moore, a man who has publicly admitted he hates Battlefield 1942 - the first game you'd expect they would be attempting to ape. Nope. Whilst it might have similarities (this is World War II after all), Invader promises to be an extremely flexible multiplayer mode that

takes the emphasis away from just killing or destroying stuff. Teams will have to co-operate (and we mean really co-operate - some objectives won't be achievable by a lone player) to hold multiple locations at once or complete objectives simultaneously in order to win, with players adopting specific classes and playing for Team bonus points rather than personal glory. Of course, more typical game modes will also be playable, and this is only a complement to the single-player game that promises to be more open-ended than any previous Medal of Honor experience. - EF

Developer: Electronic Arts ■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Due: September

NEW SHOTS!



CAN ANYONE BEAT ROGER FEDERER?
Developer: PAM
Publisher: Atari
Distributor: Atari
Due: September

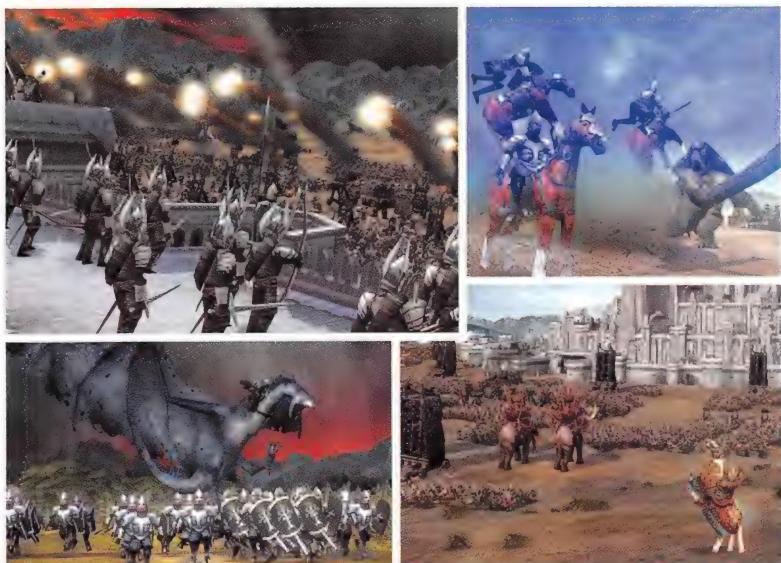
Battle for Middle Earth

JUST LIKE THE FILMS. BUT WITH ADDED WAYPOINTS

This real-time strategy game is looking to upstage Rome: Total War in terms of epic, full-scale battles, with the player taking control of forces from Rohan, Gondor, Isengard or Mordor.

The AI of units in Battle for Middle Earth (BFME) will be under the influence of an Emotion system. For example, this will cause troops to flee in terror at the sight of a Nazgul, and then regroup when they get the opportunity. This will also mean the arrival of a commanding hero character, such as Gandalf, will give them cause to be happy and push forward to fight more effectively. However, units will always do as they're told, so even if you order a pitiful group of soldiers to take on a mighty Troll, they won't ignore your orders out of blind fear.

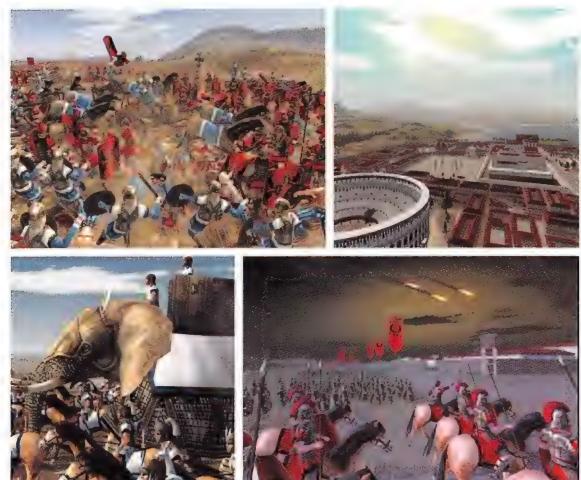
Because this game revolves around the movie license, only locations seen or referenced in the film trilogy can be utilised, so don't expect to have missions outside of what the films touched upon. However, because the game will ship with a world-builder tool out of the box, gamers will be able to create as many obscure and geeky Tolkien mods as they want. - EF



Developer: Westwood ■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Distributor: Electronic Arts ■ Due: November

Rome: Total War

YOU'LL NEVER BE SO SCARED OF AN ELEPHANT

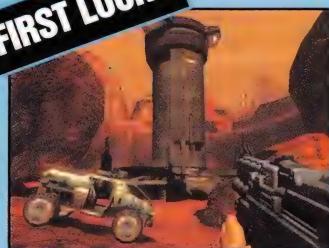


Now that the Creative Assembly team has confirmed Rome: Total War is on track to release this year, it's time to unbuckle our belts and unleash our bulging girth of excitement for this epic strategy feast. More information has come to light on specific units and unit abilities, and we love the idea that Generals will parade in front of their troops before battle and give them a rousing pep talk, the success of which will be determined by the General's own statistics and/or character traits. A cowardly officer isn't likely to instill much confidence in a small Roman army up against thousands of marauding Gauls.

The detail in Rome will be truly astounding. Scanning through the countless skirmishes in a massive battle will reveal individual animations for units stuck in precarious situations: Armoured soldiers will flail and drown if they somehow fall into water, horses will rear up and refuse to charge when faced with a wall of intimidating spears, soldiers will catch alight and burn to death should they get too close to flame... and so forth. The campaign map is also fully integrated into the 3D engine, meaning that any changes you make to your cities – such as the building of stables or a colosseum – will be fully reflected on the battlefield. - EF

Developer: Activision ■ Publisher: Activision ■ Distributor: Activision ■ Due: September

FIRST LOOK!





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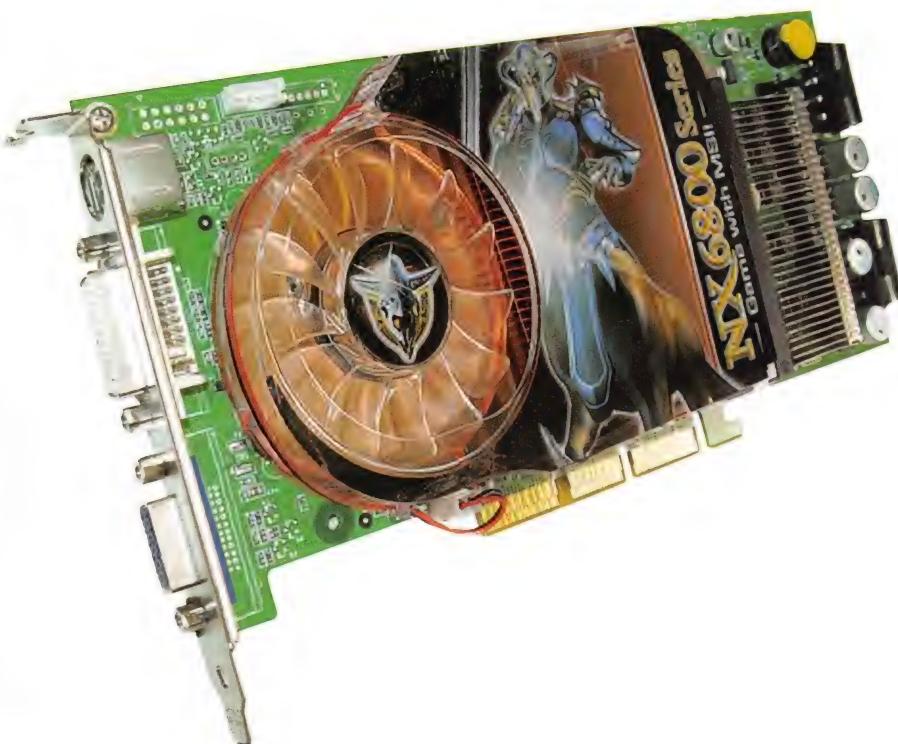
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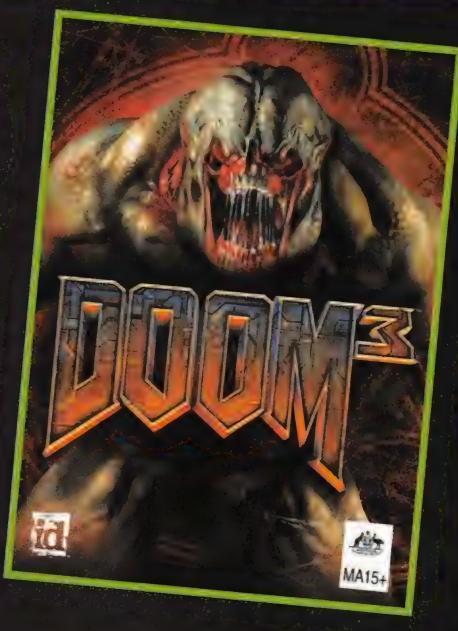
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GOING TRIBAL

AT HOME WITH THE DEVELOPER OF TRIBES: VENGEANCE





Anthony Fordham spent his whole time as editor of PCPP refusing to let anyone in the office play *Tribes 2*. So we sent him down the street to Irrational. Call it karma or call it vengeance, we call it a great new game.

The rabbit dies in a hail of grenades, explosions ricocheting off the surrounding hills, his white flag spiralling to the ground to lay in the swampy valley. Yet despite his demise, the hail of burning death only intensifies. The flag becomes the focal point of a maelstrom of destruction: grenades, flame bolts,

rail shots, bullets and explosive disks create a sort of miniature hell. Whoever thinks he can dart into the middle of all that and grab the flag is a more confident man than I, that's for sure. A figure appears at the top of the tallest hill. His specialised friction-reducing boots snap into place and he 'skis' down the slope at a

terrific pace. He's making his run, timing it just so, to skip through the firestorm, grab the flag and become the rabbit himself. And he's done it! Taking plenty of damage, sure, but deftly twisting aside from the bigger explosions and flicking on his jetpack to dance away with the flag securely attached to his back.



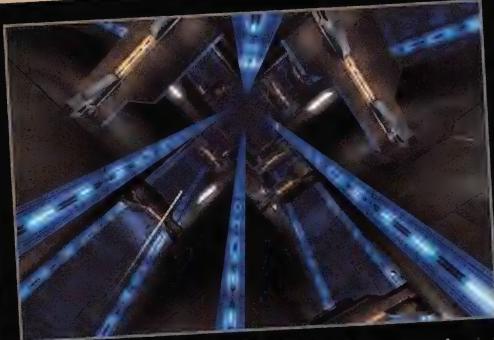
CLEAR DIRECTION

Art director Ben Lee is justifiably proud of the look of *Tribes: Vengeance*. Apart from the very swanky Vengeance Engine, the art itself combines a simple design direction with some clever execution on the part of the artists.

"Each of the three tribes have a distinct look that is very easily explained," Lee says. "The Imperials are blue and boxy, the Blood Eagles are red and spiky and the Phoenix are yellow and round."

It sounds simplistic, but that is of course the design ethic's strength: with this simple description, every item in the game has an added air of authenticity, since you can tell which faction it belongs to at a glance.





He is triumphant, he is ascendant, his score is climbing slowly but steadily as the rabbit flag pumps point after point into his tally. Four seconds later, he explodes into a mist of blood, cut down by every other player on the map. "We still have to work on that getting-shot-in-the-face recoil," muses lead designer Ed Orman. It's part of the challenge of creating Tribes: Vengeance, the third in a proud series. Somehow, the team has to integrate both a full-featured singleplayer campaign and a unique multiplayer component into the same game. And the team at Irrational has discovered some likewise unique problems.

Physically phit

"Physics behaves differently between your average singleplayer and multiplayer games," Orman explains. "Singleplayer tends to have tight, confined areas so if you shoot a wall point-blank with a powerful weapon, it will throw you backwards a certain distance. But that distance might not be appropriate in multiplayer. Likewise, area affect weapons can throw you around in a multiplayer map to an extent that just doesn't work in singleplayer. Balancing it all out is proving quite a challenge."

It's not the only challenge. Irrational is more or less programming two games at once, but trying to keep the physics and weapon behaviours the same between both. Singleplayer, as well as containing what Irrational hopes is a riveting story, is also supposed to train the player for the real meat and potatoes of Tribes: multiplayer.

Earlier in the day, I'm at lunch with Irrational producer Tony Oaken and art director Ben Lee (no not THE Ben Lee) talking about the Tribes legacy.

"I never played it, but I once had a deputy editor who was obsessed with it," I admit.

"That seems to be the common experience with Tribes," Lee says. "Everyone's heard of it, but it's always their brother or their friend who actually played it."

Naturally, Irrational is hoping to change this with Tribes: Vengeance, by creating a game that is more mainstream, more accessible and more Tribes than its predecessor.



Tribal legacy

"Tribes fans agree that Tribes 1 is the definitive Tribes game," says Oaken. "Then Tribes 2 came along and added a lot more stuff to the gameplay, but this stuff was often confusing and poorly explained."

He talks about how the second game added new items and tools for the player to use. Unfortunately, many of these tools had no explanation or instruction inside the game.

"In Tribes 2 there were four kinds of turret that all fired the same kind of weapon. But some turrets could only be placed on concrete, while others could only be placed on open ground. The game didn't tell you this

Singleplayer trains the player for the real meat and potatoes of multiplayer

of course, it just went BEEP when you tried to put a turret somewhere it couldn't go," says Oaken.

Lee interjects: "Another big problem was ordering vehicles. If you ordered a fighter or a transport while wearing heavy armour, you'd find you couldn't get in to the vehicle. The game didn't tell you that your armour was the problem, and it let you order the vehicle even while knowing full well you wouldn't be able to drive it."

The design focus of Tribes: Vengeance, then, has been to eliminate these problems, make the game clearer and more straightforward to play, and ditch the clutter and ornamentation of Tribes 2 while still keeping some of the cool innovations the second game added to the series.

"So this time we've only got one turret," says Oaken. "It works as effectively as it did in the last game, but we've removed all that confusing stuff about different terrain types. The one turret works everywhere."



Interface me baby!

It's about more than streamlined turrets, however. The Tribes: Vengeance interface is now far more helpful to the player. Bucking the depressing trend of modern games design, Irrational seems to have actually spent a lot of time thinking about how information is communicated to the player.

Discreet grey subtitles appear whenever the player approaches an in-game interface, such as an inventory station, explaining which button to press to activate the device. Once in the interface, icons are large and intentions are clear. It takes mere seconds to choose an armour type, a custom pack and a couple of weapons.

developer compressed all the action into an extremely Halo, for instance. That interface works because the more 2D-in-3D-space than it is on PC. Take a look at different bases to PC FPS. An Xbox game is even "Fps on consoles such as the Xbox are very

absolutely key piece of equipment. Tribes is an around on the ground. In Tribes, the pack is an

shaky 3D graphics, but the player mostly runs says. It's a fair assessment: most FPS have lot of the other stuff out there at the moment." Odden

"For a start, Tribes is a much more 3D game than a singleplayer for the various regions in which game. Because Irrational is in the middle of localizing about to take a look at the singleplayer part of the Oakden has always been a different kind of FPS," says

Singled out

Johanson - while testing for a map change bug at the supremacy against multiplayer designer Michael

"There I have to excuse him, because all hell has just broken loose on his monitor: he's battling for with just a couple of shortcut keys."

"Pages on the inventory screen for the tweaks to store their favorite loadouts so they can get them he explains. "We also provided heaps of blank when bounce away."

"We have shortcut keys for preselcted loadouts," keys without even entering the inventory screen and then bounce away.

"That's not to say the game doesn't still cater for the character. Watching lead designer Ed Orman refit his character is quite something: he seems merely to

brush against the inventory stat bar, flick a couple of keys against the inventory screen to tell his

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"I'm not sure if the inventory screen for the tweaks to store their favorite loadouts so they can get them he explains. "We also provided heaps of blank when bounce away."

shocked at the death she deals out, but all too- Vicki, for her part, is freed out by the experience. Vicki's helpful if Irrational's older sister guides her release in the last couple of years. Vicki's makes the game seem much more 3D than anything else forward until you hit an obstacle, then you have to fly. Using the pack in a confined space somehow helps the game feel like it's been designed for it. Vicki's

audience for die. In Tribes, you can only run normal. In a trad FPS, you just run forward until you

The shafts are another key departure from the original mezzing rooms give way to galleries and audience chamber has a stairs and rows of chairs.

Storage facilities, power generators and lift shafts. Signs to separate their purposes: the imperial

Sound familiar? Perhaps, but there's something Vicki must race to the escape pods and freedom.

Later, the ship comes under attack, is boarded, and marted, then rounds off to her quarters. Seconds

haunce a bunch of lip wallahs to get

imperial pinches Victoria gives her parents and aboard some kind of luxury transporter, split young

aboard the first moments of the Master Chief's own adventures.

Still, for all his criticism of Halo, someone at Irrational must like it because it uses the opening sequence of Tribes: Vengence is at first glance difficult to tell apart from the first moments of the Master Chief's

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PEDAL TO THE METAL

"Tribes 2 had too many vehicles," asserts art director Ben Lee. "What was the point of a huge transporter in a game where the player has a jetpack and can fly wherever they like? For Vengeance, we've cut it down to just four." Irrational has taken a close look at how vehicles work in a game like Tribes. And the developer has realised that transport should be the least of vehicular duties.

"Vehicles now work like extra, bonus power armour. They give you new abilities. The pod, for instance, allows you to hover and unleash a hail of rockets," says producer Tony Oakden. "The tank gives you more armour, a powerful long-range mortar and it can even ski. The transporter is more about an airborne weapons platform with two gun turrets and a powerful bomb." But it's the buggy that seems the most interesting. A ground vehicle capable of travelling over most terrain (with occasional help from its built-in jetpack) it doesn't just deal death, it also carries a mobile spawn point and inventory station. "The buggy works as a forward command post. You can drive it around behind the enemy base and spawn team-mates behind his defences, and they can all equip using its inventory station," says Oakden.

Tasty.



quickly becoming a hardened killer, just in time for the rest of the game.

She's eventually taken captive by the Phoenix, ostensibly the good guys of the game, labouring under the Imperial yoke and beset on all sides by the ravening Blood Eagles. In contrast to the opening corridor battles - which are, after all, designed to give the player a familiar 'in' to the game - the next mission takes place in the great outdoors, and introduces such key Tribes concepts as advanced jetpacking, inventory stations and skiing.

Ski Tribes, you'll like it

Skiing of course, is famous in game design theory for being a bug in Tribes 1 that everyone liked so much the developers included it as a feature in Tribes 2. Originally, it worked by holding the jump key while moving downhill, allowing the player to build up incredible speed. Nowadays, skiing has its own button and in Tribes: Vengeance, player models are even animated with glowing, roller-blade style devices out the bottom of their boots.

Victoria's mission ends, and then a bunch of Korean text floats across the screen to indicate, as Oakden tells me, that the game has snapped forward 20 years, where we meet Julia for the first time. She's the poster-girl for the Tribes: Vengeance, and conforms to the deadly vamp model we see so often in gaming. Except, inexplicably, her breasts are quite modest (see boxout, Norks). She introduces more multiplayer concepts, such as base capturing, different armour types, and more.

Tribes: Vengeance is a big game, and Irrational is the first to admit it. "It's complicated," says Oakden, "but we've put the time and the design in to making it straightforward to learn, and very deep to play."

So will Tribes: Vengeance heal the rift that Tribes 2 created between hardcore Tribes fans and the rest of the gaming universe? Will the game show that the PC is not just the home of high-res graphics, but also the home of high-res gameplay? Will multiplayer designer Michael Johnston's dream of creating the definitive PC teamplay experience be realised?

Time will tell.





NORKS

"Working with Vivendi Universal Games has been an interesting experience," beings producer Tony Oakden. "They own the Tribes brand, so we do need to clear all our major design decisions with them. We had a bit of a time getting our main character, Julia, just right."

"We'd take a sketch of her to VUG and they'd say, can you make her more sexy?" continues art director Ben Lee. "And we'd say, how? And they'd kind of shrug and try to avoid saying give her bigger boobs. So we'd say, shall we just give her bigger boobs? And they'd

say, no no, we're not saying that, just make her sexy. So we'd go away and give her bigger boobs and they'd say yes! Exactly like that!"

"Actually we tried to keep her breasts as small as possible," says Oakden. "And we won, more or less, because people came up to us at E3 and complimented us on how Julia had quite a 'realistic' body shape compared to other computer game characters." "Of course," adds Lee, "if you were to actually build a lifesize model of her, you'd find out she does still have pretty titanic boobs."

The battle continues.



Warhammer 40K

Dawn of War





Warhammer 40K took a wargamer's love of gritty realism and morale-crushing battlefields and extrapolated it into a monolithic future. **Timothy C. Best** swaps a paint brush for a mouse...



If you are not familiar with Warhammer, then it is a future that is darker and more brutal than you're likely to ever have come across. It is a world where demons live in a dimension just shy of our own, where they reach out and corrupt men's flesh and souls. It is a dimension where only the divine Emperor's will stands between mankind and the ravages of Chaos. It is a place where our protector is a barely living husk maintained by a 10,000 year-old machine that consumes thousands of loyal souls each day, and it is a world where humanity has paid for its protection with complete servitude.

It's not a nice place, and that's without considering the bestial Orks, the army-ant Tyranids, undead Necrons and inscrutable Eldar.

Even the fantasy overtones have been darkened several shades, pumped full of unstable fluids, and then pushed to the edge of dementia. Most of the time, it's a place so ugly that it goes right out the other side into cool, kind of like a Sex Pistols song.

What it adds up to is a perfect setting for endless wars fought between friends crowding around a table and fuelling endless rivalries, in war strategy, army collecting and

miniature painting. Are you an obedient dog who loves the Marines, an airy-fairy dandy Eldar lover, or someone who can make vile-fleshiness kick with a little dry brushing?

"It's one of those settings that just screams out at you," says Dawn of War Assistant Producer Raphael van Lierop.

It is this world, and unmistakeable feel that Relic is trying to tap into.

"While sharing similar elements, turn-based tabletop wargaming and computer-based real-time strategy are quite different overall. Instead we focused on capturing the feel of the universe, which is just filled with tons of character and flavour, and is a great place to wage war in," he says.

Brutal Glory

To capture the stark impact of 40K Relic set themselves the goal of creating the most visually stunning and brutal frontline combat players had ever seen in a game like this and Lierop says that players have never seen troop "interaction" like this.

In DoW "interaction" equals carnage and you can tell that Lierop is happy about it: "There's nothing as exhilarating as watching your

squad rush into battle, tracer fire and white-hot plasma flying all over the place, and then seeing them pull out wicked combat knives, axes, and chainswords to finish things off up close and personal.

"When you see the Force Commander send enemies flying with the powerful sweep of his Daemon Hammer, or the Eldar Wraithlord pick up a unit and smash it between its powerful hands, your first thought is, 'Did I just see that?', followed, most likely, by some language you probably can't print in a magazine."

After playing the multiplayer beta, it's hard to disagree. Some of the controls might be a little rough but there's just something exciting about the big bangs. Units rush into hand-to-hand only to be flung away, snipers get blasted out of cover by energy bolts, missiles streak out of the fog of war and giant Ork-rhino beasts scare the crap out of everyone.

Watching units holster their rifles and switch to knives is something to behold, but it's also something dangerous... since any guy switching to a knife in 40K would be better served by an AI that tells them to leg it...

More than Just Nasty Looks

That's not to say that this game is all about neat unit animation and particle effects. Lierop says that while graphics might sell a few copies it's the gameplay that keeps people coming back.

To this end Relic has added a couple of surprises to help Dawn of War stand out of the crowd. You have weapons that inflict morale damage, which is good because heavy armour doesn't always protect you from fear; you have zones of cover, that make troop movements

during a fire-fight quite a dance, and you have the ability to attach special units to regular grunts to provide extra firepower for one and camouflage to the other.

Everything, except heavy weapons, fires on the move which makes for brilliant hit and run tactics and it's great watching skilful players use the speed of fast attack vehicles to chip down much more expensive units by running rings around them.

All of this is cool, but the biggest step away from your standard RTS is the new resource model that does away with woodcutters and farmers.

Apparently, the first thing Relic's lead designer said when he heard about this gig was: "Space Marines don't collect minerals".

That's a notion that's been taken to heart. Instead of defending little guys in overalls hitting a rock with a pick you have to capture certain locations known as Strategic Points.

These are spread across the map and, as Lierop explains, "the very act of resourcing actually creates a buffer zone between their base and their enemy, and brings you out into conflict with opponents who also need to expand".

In practice this means pumping out some roving troops and tagging all of the near-by points before quickly deciding if you are going rush into enemy territory, try hit and run on exposed areas, or go for a brief build-up before tackling points with force.

This might just sound like a mad land grab but Lierop explains how things tend to balance out:

"Certainly one player can expand faster, but this also means they have a wider front to defend, and it will be easier to take points from them as they spread out their military in an attempt to defend all the Strategic Points they control."

>>Feeling it Out

Relic's RTS adaptation does a lot of things right, from the fast flowing action to capturing the awesome presence of the units. When a Blood Thirster appears you know about it. The Marines sound like Delta Force raised by the Vatican and the Ork Wartracks cross deadly artillery power with the slickness of a rebuilt lawnmower. There are a lot of neat little touches that both nod to the tabletop game and add a little showmanship. Things like watching the deployment pods professionally land at your Marine base to deliver ordered vehicles or the way that Ork buildings come half-built and hap-hazardly dropped from above like flaming dump trucks off a skyscraper.

It's neat.



>>My Darn Fool Army

I admit that's its been a while since I've played a 40K game, in fact the last time I played the Squats had an army list of their own. Not that I was a fan of the half-pints. Oh no, I was an Eldar guy all the way, and not just any Eldar, but the danciest-pranciest Eldar of all: the Harlequins.

I know they sound pansy-arse, but in 40K they were anything but. Somehow, Cirque du Soleil with powerswords was just my style. With the new supplemental Harlequin rules out it might be time to dust off some miniatures...



>>Where it Gets Tricky

Balancing this game is no easy task, since the RTS basics give DoW a different centre of gravity to the table top experience. Gathering requisition points and building your armies during the match means that Ork players no longer get to swamp the board with a mass of miniatures during the deployment phase and no longer do Marine players know that they have to kill five guys to their every one to make it through. It also means that army-list restrictions are harder to enforce. Marine armies that fill the unit cap with Terminators, and the vehicle cap with Dreadnoughts and Predators aren't uncommon in the late stages of games, which is pretty standard for an RTS but doesn't feel right for 40K.



>>Making it Your Own

Okay, so some of the units and armies are a bit out at the moment. Before you start to worry too much, Relic has made a big deal about its unit editor which allows designers to make quick and easy balance adjustments, so we can all hope that the tweaks (and squad limits) capture the army feel as well as the neat art work and booming effects.

Even if they mess it up, Relic is releasing a map editor with the game and is promising to support the mod community, so DoW is only the beginning, and it's not like there aren't plenty of artistic-types playing 40K.

This Thing's Army

Of course, a lot of your early tactical choices will be modified by your choice of army. Each of the armies promise a different look, play-style and feel.

Chaos excels at hand-to-hand, gets demons, and has some great fire-power. The Eldar have strong specialist troops and can teleport their guys (and buildings) around for some dazzling strategies, while Orks get the highest population caps and plenty of cheap guns. In fact, Ork guns are so cheap even their buildings get them.

Orks are a strange race all over. They aren't big on research so instead of spending points on it like everyone else, they build Waaagh Banners that generate the equivalent of Ork respect. That lets them enlist more troops and these troops in turn generate the Waaagh they need to attract the bigger boyz with da bigger toyz.

Finally we have the Marines. They are the most rounded army, with solid vehicles, high-quality basic troops and lots of weapon upgrades.

Upgrades in Dawn of War redefine the battlefield. By spending the points to upgrade half of your Marine Squad to Heavy Bolters you get a unit that's great at killing infantry. If you go for flamers, your squad is great at breaking morale, while missile launchers give them

range and anti-armour chops. The availability and cost of upgrades also help define armies, making individual Marine units a mighty money pit; while the lack of upgrades keeps Eldar troops specialised.

Something that goes hand in hand with the upgrades is the "reinforce" option. It lets squads recruit new units as they go along, even in combat. This is great for keeping units out in the field without having to run home to momma.

Of course, sometimes, running home to momma will be the best option since all the usual suspects including super heavy units, artillery, stealth units, transports, medics all appear and all can turn things around on you, especially if they've been playing with the upgrade options.

Your Army, Your War

All of these neat options give you plenty of opportunity to customise your fighting force once the war begins, but Relic has made sure that the most important custom job goes down before the battle.

In a nod to the table top game, Relic has included a little something called the Army Painter. In the skirmish modes players can personalise their army's appearance, selecting colours (from the colour wheel or Games

Workshop standards like Bleached Bone) for the main body, helmet, trim, weapons and eyes, as well being able to upload home-made banners and badges.

Having instantly recognisable and intimately personal paint schemes is something that makes 40K miniature collecting such a joy, and Relic have made it so table-top players will at least be able to put together something that resembles what they have sitting on their shelves at home.

Your colour scheme is a little less free in the single player campaign as Relic created a brand new chapter of Marines to play, namely the Blood Ravens. The game begins with the Ravens having one straight-forward mission: defend a planet from Ork invasion. Soon complications start to appear like clues to the Chapter's erased past and certain guess appearances by Chaos and Eldar forces.

All of the intrigue will unfold in cut-scenes either side of missions, while a war diary will keep players up to date in the heat of battle. Little is known about the actual single player game but Relic says players can look forward to nasty surprises and in-mission updates as things get out of hand.

Unlike in Homeworld, there won't be persistent troops, but you can requisition different troops for

missions, and you always have the upgrades and reinforcement options to get your troops back up to speed.

When it comes to the multiplayer game, Relic promises about a dozen game modes including capture the flag, assassination, strategic control (holding a majority of the strategic points on a map) and good-old annihilation. From two to eight players can take part, and things look like they are going to get very messy, with giant demons, masses of artillery, teleporting bases, snipers, psychic lightning storms and the Bloody-Handed God of the Eldar.

On the Front

Relic still faces a tough battle with the army balancing, and we're yet to explore the single player game, but even in the slightly wonky multiplayer beta, this game has teeth.

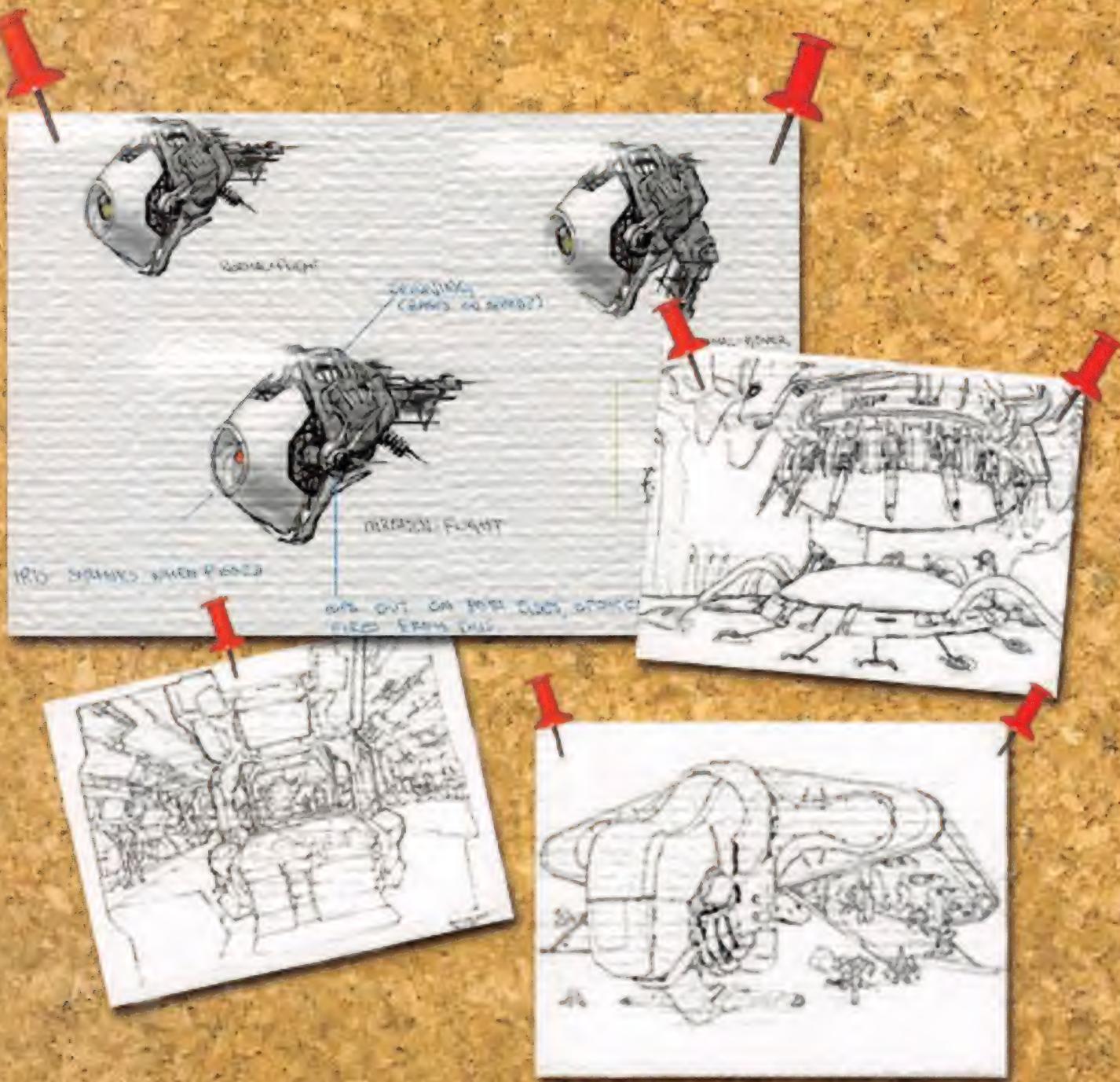
The time Relic has injected into its extra thrills and spills is written in every clash and the world, and armies, draw on source material with enough bite to make people spend \$20 a pop on a host of tiny toys that you have to paint yourself.

Dawn of War looks like it's going to be the most explosive window into the 40K universe yet, and having played the beta, we can tell you that the charges look like they're in the right spots. We'll let you know about the wiring in September...



DESIGN CLASS

A lesson in game theory





From Socrates to Star Wars, today's university students can opt to study a wide variety of modes of human expression. And if Homer - of both the *Odyssey* and Springfield persuasion - is worthy of serious philosophical thought, then why not videogames such as *Half Life* or *Halo*? David Wildgoose sits in on a tutorial on the current state of videogame research...



Just as the early years of last century saw academic research into film follow in the wake of the invention and popularisation of the cinematic medium, we are now seeing the beginning of a similar strand of study into videogames.

The approach to gaming at institutions of higher education is no longer limited to practical courses in programming, CG graphics or after-hours Counter-Strike sessions in the computer room.

Throughout the world, academics in faculties as diverse as English, Fine Arts, Communications, Media Studies and Computer Science are teaching and conducting research into the "art" of videogames, treating the form as a subject for study as serious and significant as any film by Eisenstein, painting by Picasso, or essay by Nietzsche.

Yet far from the stereotyped image of dotty, elbow-patched professors in their ivory towers, these academic types are definitely not all talk and no action. They are keen to use their research to contribute to the greater cause of making better games. Over the next few pages we meet up with some of the leading lights in the field of Game Theory...

Barry Atkins works in the

Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is the author of *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* (Manchester University Press, 2003).

Atkins reveals his studies have recently seen him moving from the exploration of game theory in the abstract towards the integration of theory with practical work:

"I am running a Masters course that produces industry-ready students (particularly in terms of game art production and animation), but also contains elements that are intended to produce informed and reflective producers of games."

Gonzalo Frasca is a videogame researcher and developer, currently working at the Center for Computer



Games Research (game.itu.dk) at the IT University in Copenhagen. He's the co-founder and senior producer at Powerful Robot Games (www.powerfulrobot.com), a videogame development studio focusing on advergaming and webgames.

"I edit Ludology.org, a game research blog that has been around for many years, where I post thoughts and news for game researchers," says Frasca. "While the journal is addressed to

academics, I try to write not in academe but in plain English, because I think game theory should be open to everybody. I also do some teaching and talk in conferences. Currently, I am writing a PhD project on "play", focusing on open-ended simulations."

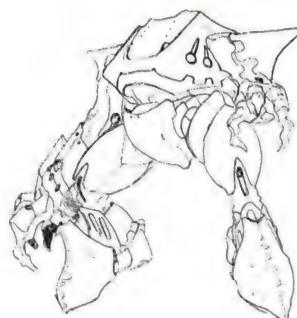
Henry Jenkins is a veteran of game studies, having been writing about videogames for the better part of fifteen years. He is a professor in Comparative Media Studies at MIT, in Massachusetts, and a leading figure in programs aimed at connecting game developers with game academics. With Justine Cassell, he co-edited the book *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

"I was one of the first American academics in media studies to look seriously at computer and video games as an emerging medium of expression," says Jenkins. "I was one of the founders of The Education Arcade, an MIT-based consortium which promotes the pedagogical uses of computer and video games. In that role, we have been converting our theories about games and education into the design of game prototypes and testing them through classroom use."

Finally, Daniel Staines has been writing about videogames for four years as a game critic. He edits PSW and GBA World magazines and has written for PC PowerPlay, Hyper and the Official Xbox magazine.

"As a game critic, it's basically my job to analyse games and gaming culture," says Staines. "In Game Theory, a monthly column I write for Hyper magazine, I address issues related to the study of gaming and participate in online discussions dedicated to those issues."

With the introductions out of the way, let the class commence...





HENRY JENKINS USA

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1 What is your personal definition of game theory?

Theory refers to meaningful generalisations which we construct to explain some central aspect of a cultural phenomenon. Theory emerges when gamers talk about why they prefer games with or without cut scenes; it occurs when game designers talk about the role of genre in their medium; it plays a role when policy makers discuss whether games do or do not represent a medium that expresses ideas; and it is in play when academics discuss whether games produced by the military do or do not function as propaganda. In my own work, theory is bound to real world debates which shape the future of the games industry or influence the way the public – gamers and nongamers alike – think about the medium. I think theory is misunderstood because it is thought to be something which only has value within the Ivory Towers but in fact, game theory is essential at all levels as we make sense of an emerging medium whose full scope and potential still hasn't been realised.

2 Do we need a theory of games?
We, as game designers, need theory because we need to solidify what we've learned about the medium so far, so that we can pass along the insights of the best designers to the next generations which work in the medium. We, as industry leaders, need theory because theory becomes a resource for training and identifying the employees of the future. We, as the public, need theory because it can

help foster serious criticism of games which will encourage innovation by helping consumers find and appreciate the best games on the market. We, as gamers, need theory because a real understanding of the potential of the medium (and of its social effects) can become a resource we use to challenge fearful media reformers and policy makers who would restrict access to games. Not all theory is useful on these levels, but much of it speaks to these questions if we are willing to take the steps to master it. Theory gives us a language we can use to talk amongst ourselves and to the outside world about why games matter.

3 What do you hope the study of gaming will achieve?

I think theory is emerging right now from all of the groups who discuss or think about games as a medium. Academic theorists do have some significant contributions to make precisely because they are outside of the immediate economic demands to make and ship product. They are in the position to step outside the process and ask questions or to do research which has long term rather than short term impact. They are in a position to ask what games could do.

4 An awful lot of game theory seems to be an attempt to shoehorn film (or literature)

theory to fit videogames. Do you see this as a positive or a negative thing? You have to distinguish between two groups – those who seek theories to explain what they find fascinating about games and those who seek out games to illustrate some aspect of their theory. Any academic field attracts both. The power of comparative work is that it helps you to see both continuities and discontinuities across media. By seeing where film theory breaks down, you can start to see what aspects of games are distinctive from other media. You have to keep in mind that models can prevent you from seeing things as much as they help you see things. So, the field of game theory has benefited from people applying other models – from the sociology and anthropology of play, from architecture, from economics. If games as a medium are still trying to define the scope of what they can do, academic game theory is at an even earlier stage, still trying to identify the range of tools and the basic vocabulary it needs to talk about what is important about this emerging medium. I think academic game theory is undergoing a sea change right now. The first generation of theorists crossed over from other disciplines and helped carve out a space for games within the universities. Our work had some degree of generality because we were more interested in games as a

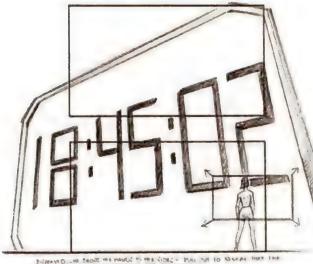
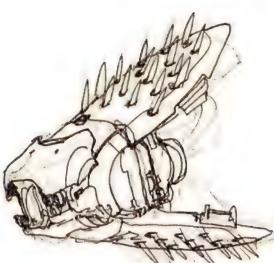
medium than in the specifics of individual games. We have helped pave the way for a new generation which is just now entering graduate school or taking their first university posts. This is the generation which grew up playing games. They have an encyclopedic knowledge of the medium, being able to refer to hundreds of different titles. They are going to transform what we mean by game theory and push us old guys out of the way.

5 There appears to be a tremendous amount of hostility and/or suspicion directed by gamers and game developers towards game theorists and academics. To what do you attribute this to and how can it be overcome?

A lot of it is old baggage being brought to a new context. Many gamers have had bad experiences in school and turn to games as a means of escape from the academic world. They don't necessarily want us bringing games into school or school into games, for that matter. My experience with game designers is that many of them were class clowns – extremely bright people whose creative energy was not easily contained within the schoolroom and who often pushed back to test the limits of what their teachers knew. As someone who does workshops with game designers, I do feel a bit of push back from time to time and breaking down that resistance is what I enjoy about the process. At the same time, many academics still conceive of their work as having little or no real world benefits. They speak in an abstract language which insures communication with their peers but cuts them off from the rest of the world. One of my missions has been to try to break down the wall separating the two groups – to show that game theory has an immediate connection to issues being discussed by gamers and game designers. I see game theory as pragmatic, as helping to shape the critical context in which games operate, as helping to rally support behind a medium too often under siege by local authorities who don't understand what they are talking about.

6 How can theorists and developers work together to further the understanding of the medium?

In America, there is already a lot of collaboration and conversation between the two groups. There have been academic summits held at the Game Developers Conference which are designed to create a better interface between the two groups. I have done the creative leaders workshops with Electronic Arts. I am on first name basis with many of the leaders of the American games industry. We recently held a two day summit of games and education as part of the E3 convention in Los



Angeles, which brought together people like Will Wright, Warren Spector, and Brenda Laurel to talk with educators and media theorists working in that area. And the scholars have signed amicus briefs helping to challenge and overturn local ordinances which would regulate video game content. We often bring local game designers to campus to interact with our students, share their insights about the medium, and critique their work.

7 Should videogames be viewed and appreciated as "art"? I earnestly believe that games are going to be one of the most important artforms of the 21st century and as they do so, they are going to transform our understanding of the relationship between art and everyday life. Right now, if we call games art, it implies we think they should be stuck in some art gallery. Yet, by art, I mean something which encourages expressivity, creativity, experimentation, self-reflection, and play, which gives some aesthetic shape and meaning to elements in the world around us. And for me, art is most powerful when it breaks out of the museum and touches people where they live. Thinking of games as art has many different consequences: first, it gives us a powerful argument for challenging censorship efforts. Right now, in the United States, judges have ruled that games do not enjoy the same free expression rights as other media because they do not express ideas. Making stronger arguments for games as art might help turn this argument around. Second, game developers need to start thinking of themselves as artists because it will force them to think more deeply about what kinds of ideas they are expressing through their work. And third, having a language to talk about games as art will produce better games criticism. Right now, game critics have narrow criteria and often function as a conservative force, helping to stifle innovation in the medium. In other arts, the best critics embrace experimentation and innovation, helping to explain to the public why new approaches matter and educating them on how to get maximum value out of their experiences. That's what games need if we are going to support the most innovative products and if we are going to expand the place of games in our culture. As with all of your questions, I don't see art talk as the exclusive providence of academic theorists at all. Again, if this discussion occurs only in the university space, then it will not have the impact I am describing. Yet, in this case, academic respectability does have some value in giving credibility to other groups who are asserting claims about games as art.



BARRY ATKINS UK

Barry Atkins works in the Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University, England. He is the author of "More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form" (Manchester University Press, 2003).

1 What is your personal definition of game theory?

I don't really have one. Games are a hugely significant cultural phenomena not just because of their economic worth or value, but because of the place they have as a normal part of the entertainment diet of those generations that grew up with gaming. I am very laissez faire in my attitude towards what game theory 'can' or 'should' be - game theory could describe any intelligent and informed thinking about games. Mind you, we are all 'game theorists': anyone who has ever tried to explain the joys of Mario or Civilization or Halo to someone else has theorized games.

2 Do we need a theory of games? 'Need'? As in need a cure for cancer? Nope. But if we are to see the maturation of gaming then people will theorise (even if they are Warren Spector or Will Wright), and academia has a place in developing the critique and understanding of games, partly for its own intrinsic value as commentary on such an important area of cultural production, and partly because it might have something to offer gaming and games development.

3 What do you hope the study of gaming will achieve? It will certainly continue to irritate some in the industry, and that might actually be useful in generating debate and opening up questions of where gaming is going. So long as we academics don't think we can offer advice to the practitioners as if they haven't understood what they are doing, and avoid being patronising, then academic enquiry can only be a benefit. Does 'the future of games'

depend on what happens in academia? No. I am actually sympathetic to any developer who sees games in academia as a luxury, that might reflect increasing acceptance of games as an art form (as Film Studies did for cinema), but has yet to prove direct worth. Given that academic responsibility is to produce critical and informed graduates, rather than just to train students for jobs, there are going to be interesting moments ahead.

4 An awful lot of game theory seems to be an attempt to shoehorn film (or literature) theory to fit videogames. Do you see this as a positive or a negative thing?

I'm not sure that is true. It is easy to make that accusation (and it flies around in academia all the time), but people are always going to draw on analogy and comparison in order to articulate what they observe before them. I 'used' some elements of literary theory when I wrote about games in More than a game, but I was never stupid enough to forget that what I was confronted with was computer games.

5 There appears to be a tremendous amount of hostility and/or suspicion directed by gamers and game developers towards game theorists and academics. To what do you attribute this to and how can it be overcome?

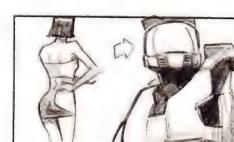
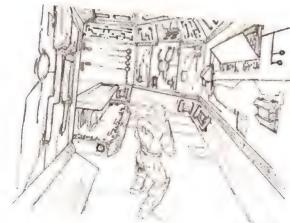
There is a reverse snobbery here about elitist ivory tower academics spouting jargon and missing the point. It can be true, at times. But an awful lot of the academics involved in the field are gamers as well as academics, and are capable of producing academic work that is also accessible to gamers.

6 How should (or can) theorists and developers work together to further the understanding of the medium?

Well, Gonzalo Frasca would be a good example of thinking and doing, as would be most of ITU Copenhagen, but I wouldn't want to legislate the how or the should. Cross fertilisation of any sort (and I was just talking to a professional game developer who contributes to my MA a moment ago) is a good thing. But some areas of academic enquiry can exist quite happily, I would have thought, without needing to contribute directly to the industry.

7 Should videogames be viewed and appreciated as "art"?

Rather than try to summarise the history of Western aesthetics, I'll keep it short: the answer is not important, but the question will continue to be asked.





GONZALO FRASCA Denmark

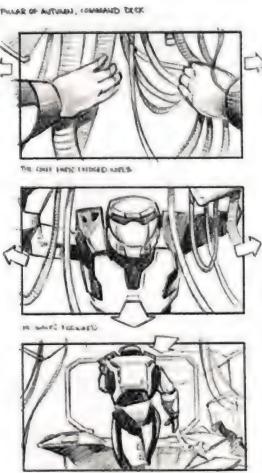
Gonzalo Frasca is a videogame researcher and developer, currently working at the Center for Computer Games Research at the IT University in Copenhagen. He's co-founder and senior producer at Powerful Robot Games, a videogame development studio focusing on advergaming and webgames. He publishes www.ludology.org, a website dedicated to videogame research.

1 What is your personal definition of game theory?

A few years ago, I suggested the term "ludology" for describing a discipline that did not yet exist, a discipline that dealt with games, and particularly videogames. For me, ludology is a way to better understand videogames. We need to better study traditional, non-electronic games, too. What is that makes games fun? How people relate to games? What can games teach us about ourselves? Those are some of the questions that ludology aims at answering.

2 Do we need a theory of games?

The question is awfully close to "what is the practical use of theory?" Theory does not necessarily need to have a clear application. For example, philosophy books are not going to be very helpful to solve your personal problems. However, they provide a framework in which to view the world. Theory in games works in a similar way. Most of it is simply a set of tools that can help us to better talk about games, to better compare them and eventually to better understand them. In some other cases, it can have very practical applications. For example, I have been theorising how to make games that deal with political issues for many years. Last year, a pre-candidate for the US elections hired me and my colleague Ian Bogost to make a



game for his campaign. Now, we are also both involved on a second campaign game for the Democrat National Convention. Most of this is uncharted territory but it certainly helped me that I spend quite a few years thinking about these issues.

3 What do you hope the study of gaming will achieve?

The academic study of games, as an established field, is quite new. There are very few universities where to study games and even a smaller amount of research centers. I am lucky to be part of the Center for Computer Games Research, in Copenhagen, which offers both Masters and PhD degrees in videogames. I think in the next couple of decades, universities will play a major role as places where the next gamemakers will learn their trade. Certainly, the first filmmakers had to learn by themselves, but Spielberg, Lucas and Coppola, they all went to film school. A diploma degree is not a guarantee of success, but it can provide with a place for experimentation and learning. The next Miyamoto might come out of a game school, too.

4 An awful lot of game theory seems to be an attempt to shoehorn film (or literature) theory to fit videogames. Do you see this as a positive or a negative thing?

Well, I am known in the field as a particular anti-film and anti-literature kind of guy. That is sort of a caricature, but it is true that I believe that games should be studied first as games. We all know how boring "cinematic" games are. Of course, it is much easier to compare games with film and literature, since the latter have been studied for centuries. I believe that we should do things the right way, even if it is not the easiest way. Sure, we can learn something from other media, but we should first focus on the games themselves.

5 There appears to be a tremendous amount of hostility or suspicion directed by gamers and game developers towards game theorists and academics. To what do you attribute this and how can it be overcome?

Well, I have been a game theorist for almost a decade now. Certainly, I had my share of encounters with grumpy game designers (one of them told me that I had no clue of what I was talking about, but that there was a room for me in the industry... as a game tester). There's always been frictions

between those who theorise and those who do. My case is sort of particular, because I am also a game designer/producer who has produced dozens of webgames. Still, that perceived hostility may just be perception. The IGDA has been having an academic track at GDC for years now, and every year there is more and more interest, with more people showing up at the sessions. Major designers such as Will Wright have been very supportive of theorists.

It is true that about a decade ago, most academics looking into games were people in their fifties who were not gamers. To make things worse, many of them focused on the "dangers" of videogames. However, things have changed and now most of the researchers are young and grew up with games. True, some people in the industry may still see us as freaks. If you run into one of those, let him/her know that we'll settle that over a CS match!

6 How should (or can) theorists and developers work together to further the understanding of the medium?

There are many ways in which the industry and academia have been working together. However, there is not necessarily a reason why they should work together. Film directors do not have academics on the set while they are shooting their films. However, academics wrote the books that they used in college. Academics may write critical approaches to films that may help directors having a different point of view on filmmaking. Eventually, the same will happen in videogames.

7 Should videogames be viewed and appreciated as "art"?

There is no such thing as "art". It is the society as a whole who decides what is art and what is not. Certainly, academics can contribute with a sophisticated critique of games that may help non-gamers to see games as something culturally valuable. Personally, I am not that interested in answering if games are "art", but if they are important to our every day lives or not. Recently the Democrat National Convention launched Opinions, a game developed by Ian Bogost, in which I served as design advisor. It is an official game for the US election. Both Ian and myself work as researchers in universities (Georgia Tech and Center for Computer Games Research, respectively). Surely, Opinions will not change the US elections by itself, but if a major party is using it for politics, then games are not just for kids anymore.



DANIEL STAINES Australia

Daniel Staines is a videogame critic and magazine editor. At Next Media, he manages PlayStation World and GBA World and also writes a monthly "Game Theory" column for PCPP's other sister magazine, Hyper.

1 What is your personal definition of game theory?

For me, game theory is a blanket category that covers any systematic attempt to understand videogames as a medium and/or cultural phenomenon. It's an all-encompassing rubric in the same sense that "science" encompasses sub-disciplines like physics, biology and chemistry. Although it's at a rudimentary stage of development, a similar sub-disciplinary structure is developing within game theory; particular schools devoted to subjects like game design, game semiotics and game sociology are becoming more and more prevalent. Most are simply the application of an established school of thought to the subject of games, but I think that's starting to change and game theory is well on the way to becoming an independent meta-discipline.

2 Do we need a theory of games?

I don't think it's necessary in any strict sense, but game theory certainly has the potential to be very beneficial for game developers and consumers. On the development side, game theory strives to reveal the underlying principles that guide the production of good games. It contributes to our understanding of how games work and thus makes it easier to identify the individual elements that make good games good and bad games bad. Obviously, this is going to end up being beneficial to the consumer (and gaming generally) because the probability of developers making better games increases along with their understanding of the medium they're working with. Or so the theory goes.

In addition to that, there's also the purely academic attraction of study for the sake of study. Do we need a philosophy of science or a psychology of whales or any of the other esoteric and arcane academic pursuits that characterise modern universities? Probably not - but that doesn't make them any less worthy as areas of study. Even if it isn't useful in any immediate sense, there's no reason why there can't be a game theory for game theory's sake.

3 What do you hope the study of gaming will achieve?

The academic study of videogames is significant for a variety of reasons. I think that academia confers a certain cultural prestige upon its subjects - that anything deemed worthy of widespread academic attention somehow becomes more "important" and less likely to be discounted as frivolous by the powers that be. This is important because I think that much of the legislation governing games is made upon the erroneous assumption that games are in some way a trivial pastime with - as judge Stephen Limbaugh put it - "no conveyance of ideas, expression or anything else that could amount to free speech". The prestige afforded to games by gaming academia could help change that perception.

This leads into my second point, which is that I think that videogaming needs its own "experts" capable of being called upon to defend the medium from detractors and assist in legislation and other official procedures. Admittedly, industry bodies such as the ESA already perform this role to a certain extent, but I believe their authority would be strengthened significantly if they were capable of calling upon academic expertise in the way that other industry bodies can.

Furthermore, I believe that imbuing the study of games with academic principles will ultimately be beneficial to game theory as a discipline. The structure of academic inquiry - characterised by peer-reviewed journals, conferences and university teaching - has proven itself to be extremely successful at producing useful knowledge, and that is ultimately what I and a lot of other people would like game theory to do: produce useful knowledge. Useful knowledge for developers, useful knowledge for legislators, useful knowledge for critics and useful knowledge for consumers.

4 An awful lot of game theory seems to be an attempt to shoehorn film (or literature) theory to fit videogames. Do you see this as a positive or a negative thing?

I think it's a necessary thing. The situation at the moment is that people are being confronted with this new form of media that demands analysis and they haven't yet developed specific intellectual tools for the job. The obvious solution is to use tools that have been developed in other contexts - namely film, literature and art theory - until they prove inadequate. This relates back to my response to the second question: a lot of game theory at the moment is very much about applying knowledge developed in other academic disciplines to the subject of games, but I expect that to change as the field develops and becomes a discipline in its own right.

5 There appears to be a tremendous amount of hostility and/or suspicion directed by gamers and game developers towards game theorists and academics. To what do you attribute this to and how can it be overcome?

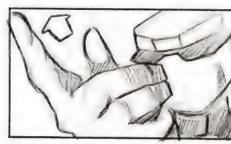
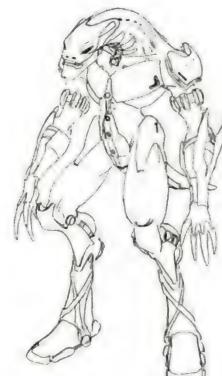
I believe that the hostility referred to is simply a gaming specific instance of a general resentment a lot of people feel towards intellectuals of any kind. I'm not a psychologist or sociologist, so I don't pretend to know what causes this or how to overcome it. I think it's better for game theorists and academics to simply accept it as part of the package and get on with doing what they feel is important.

6 How should (or can) theorists and developers work together to further the understanding of the medium?

Once again, I'm inclined towards following the example set by existing academic institutions and establishing peer-reviewed journals and conferences through which gaming academics and game developers can interact freely and communicate ideas in an open setting. Indeed, both of these things already exist to a certain extent: there are numerous online periodicals devoted to the subject of game theory, and the annual IGDC conference has proven to be an excellent forum for the kind of intellectual exchange we're talking about. We just need more of both.

7 Should videogames be viewed and appreciated as "art"?

To be perfectly honest, I really couldn't give a damn about the whole "but is it art" question. To debate whether an entire medium is worthy of being art, when it's clear that the honorific only applies to specific examples of it, is fruitless and actually quite frustrating. I'd rather avoid it altogether.



THE PCPP INTERVIEW

Dr David Kirk is a stupidly smart man, if that makes any sense. As the chief scientist at NVIDIA, Dr Kirk is the driving force behind the engineering of the amazing technology that goes into NVIDIA's products.

Bennett Ring was lucky enough to have a chat with him when he recently visited Sydney.

Curriculum Vitae

Name: **Dr David Kirk**

Title: **Chief Scientist**

Company: **NVIDIA**

Location: **USA**

Projects: **Chief Scientist, Crystal Dynamics. Engineer, Apollo Systems at HP.**

What do you think has been the most important development in gaming graphics over the last ten years, with the exception of dedicated 3D accelerators?

I think one aspect of 3D accelerators has been extremely important and we continue to see a big impact from, and that's programmable graphics. The fact that the 3D graphics pipeline, which used to be hardwired and did exactly one thing but got faster each year, now the pipeline has programmable processing elements like shaders. We can get much more interesting geometry and much more interesting materials and effects. This has completely changed the way games look.

What do you think will be the most important development in the next ten years?

I think the biggest development in the next ten years will be the increase in pervasiveness of gaming, as finally the experience of gaming is comparable with the quality of the experience in movies and other media and also gaming is now moving to other devices beyond the console and beyond the PC. It'll be moving to the cell phones and handhelds and other devices.

Do you think that video processors are facing the same problems as CPUs in regards to heat dissipation and the complexity of the designs, and as a result we're going to have to move towards dual processing solutions?

One of the interesting things is that if you look at the way CPUs are built and the way GPUs are built, it's quite different. CPUs have for a long time just been ever faster but still a single processor, and so you have these 3 and soon 4 gigahertz processors which are dissipating a lot of heat.

Although there's a lot of talk about how much heat GPUs dissipate, it's nothing like the amount of heat that CPUs dissipate. It's much smaller. And the reason why it's more of a problem for GPUs is that if you look at the inside of the chassis all of the airflow in the whole PC is designed to cool the CPU and then off on the side there, there's a little breeze which gives a little cooling for the GPU. So we're actually at a much lower level of power at this point. In addition, you asked about multiple cores. GPUs have had parallel processing elements for a long time. CPUs are talking about now they're going to go to two cores. Whoop-de-doo. We've not had a number smaller than two in GPUs for a long time, so we're already basically going down that path. And in fact, one of the fascinating things about the 6800 is that we've already started to push the trend of adding more parallelism, more pipelines, at a lower clockrate. The 6800 actually runs at a lower clock rate than the 5950 did.

When can we finally kiss OpenGL goodbye. Will that be when Carmack retires?

I think that for gaming really the main proponent of OpenGL was John Carmack. I think for other applications like professional workstations and scientific visualisation OpenGL is really here to stay. It's not going to go away. But I don't expect you'll see much use of it for gaming.

So the end is in sight? Will that make your life a lot easier?

Well, I don't know if the end is in sight - we also produce professional workstations so all of our hardware runs both DirectX and OpenGL, and that won't change. And on the Macintosh, as far as I know DirectX

isn't available for gaming. Also, game consoles that are not Xbox will use a GL-like environment.

How far away do you think we are from truly photorealistic graphics, and we're not talking about the marketers definition of the word. I think that we're at least ten years away, perhaps maybe as many as twenty, and when you ask about photorealistic I think of it in terms of when can we make pictures of people and forests and oceans that you can't tell the difference. You don't even know it's computer generated.

What do you think will be the next big leap in display devices?

I think that there are two possible new technologies that are coming. One of them is first of all much higher resolution panels are coming. We've already seen some of them at the very high end from IBM and Viewsonic. The ten megapixel displays, but even so LCD and Plasma still don't have the colour fidelity and the precision of display in terms of brightness that CRTs have. So I'm hoping to see better quality and one path to that is high dynamic range displays. It's technology that is being adopted for game engines and for graphics hardware like the 6800 to display more than 8-bits per colour component. There's some research projects for high dynamic range displays actually that are able to display more than 8-bits per colour to get brighter brights and darker darks, and more range from the brightest to the darkest. I think you'll begin to see those over the next few years.

What are your thoughts on our holy grail of gaming, Virtual Reality - how far away is it, and is it really possible? I think VR is difficult due to

nausea and simulator sickness. If you make the game too real but you don't actually correctly provide motion cues you can't just make the graphics move, you have to make the person move because if what your eyes are telling you is different from what your body is telling you, you're going to get sick.

But many people get motion sickness from computer games, but soon get over this after a little practice? Do you think we can overcome this with VR?

I don't think we know how to really solve that problem. Actually, the better the illusion of motion gets, the worse the problem is with simulator sickness. The more convincing it is for your eyes, the more disconcerting it is that your body isn't moving.

How do you feel the PC gaming market is shaping up at the moment in the face of the growing popularity of the consoles? It seems NVIDIA is taking a lot of focus off its PC gaming hardware and is moving into mobile phones - is that a result of the softening of the PC gaming market?

I disagree that we're removing focus. It's only possible to grow your market share up to 100% and then you have to go find new markets. We're within a factor of two of 100% market share for PC graphics, so if we want to continue to grow the company we have to go build other products as well.

As for whether or not the PC market is softening, we're currently in a decline of console gaming, because we're between generations. And every time there's a decline in console gaming, there's a resurgence of PC gaming. So we're actually seeing a very strong increase in PC gaming right now. It's becoming a much more dynamic market. As the last generation of consoles, Xbox and PS2, are declining in sales, and PS3 and Xbox 2 haven't arrived yet, there's less excitement in the console market right now.

Anything else you'd like to add? I think my closing comment go back to your question about what's happening in the PC market. I think really, really exciting things continue to happen in 3D graphics, both in terms of on the PC and other devices. It's a great time to be working in this industry, and I think it's also a great time to be a consumer.



GAMES IN REVIEW

Whatever happened to adventure games? Any experienced gamer raised on a diet of King's Quest, Monkey Island and all those other classic Sierra and LucasArts adventure games has - besides being treated for malnutrition - surely asked themselves the very same question numerous times throughout the past few years.

When I think about PC gaming in the 80s and early 90s it is the point-and-click adventure that immediately springs to mind. Zak McKracken, Day of the Tentacle, Lure of the Temptress, Quest for Glory... these were the games we "hardcore" gamers played. Insult swordfighting, flushing hamsters through time toilets, buying multi-coloured and multi-flavoured condoms, wacking rats in seedy carnivals... these were the things that occupied our time.

After Myst and its extraordinary success, adventure games were never quite the same again. Instead of well-plotted tales, cleverly scripted dialogue and amusing puzzles based around combining objects in seemingly ludicrous but always logical ways (within the game's skewed world view, anyway), we instead had to make do with levers and indecipherable runes and buttons and observatories (why did every Myst clone have an observatory?).

As demonstrated by the four adventure games we have in for review this issue, things haven't really improved. They may not all be Myst clones but there's still none of the wit and imagination that seduced us a decade or more ago.



Game of the Month 69

Spellforce

Adventure games never went away, they just veered totally off course and ran aground on some desolate island where the enigmatic inhabitants speak in riddles and no one could be bothered writing instruction manuals for any of its machinery, including the observatories. Especially the observatories.

David Wildgoose,
Editor

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GOLD AWARD	HIGH DISTINCTION	DISTINCTION	CREDIT	PASS	FAIL
The ultimate accolade. A game that receives a Gold Award is an essential purchase, and the only excuse for not owning it is either not having a powerful enough PC, or not having a PC at all. Or arms. It represents a new direction in gaming, a new benchmark against which all others will be measured. It defines its genre, or creates a new one. It is gaming. You must own it.	This is the finest in gaming. A fresh concept, a perfect execution, a meaningful extension to a tried and tested format, one or all of these are required for this score. We strongly recommend the purchase of each High Distinction game, but extremely fussy gamers may want to skip those HD games that don't also receive Gold Awards.	An intriguing new concept or a bold new direction that manages to pull its new trick off with a reasonable degree of flair. You will be impressed, at either the graphics, the gameplay or some other new element that you may not have encountered before. Or perhaps this is a familiar gaming concept, but one executed so well it's almost - but not quite - an essential purchase.	Solid, playable, largely bug-free, entertaining and maybe even a bit unexpected, these are the hallmarks of a game of Credit. You may have seen it all before, but you won't mind, because a Credit game does what it says on the box - it plays well and it keeps you hooked. An essential purchase? Not necessarily, but worth consideration.	A game that receives a pass is playable, but its concept may be flawed, its extras may be lacking or its graphical enhancements may have fallen off somewhere in a lengthy bug-fixing process. And bugs there may be, although in the end the game will, as we say, work. Purchase if you're curious, but discerning gamers will probably look for something more substantial.	There are more than 5000 games released each year. Some are gems. Some are merely unremarkable. Others are nothing more than a shameless grab for cash. Graphics will be rudimentary and gameplay will be worse. If you see someone considering a game that has failed, gently take them by the elbow and hurl them out of the shop. It's your duty as a good citizen.
90+	85-100	75-84	65-74	50-64	0-49

Spellforce The Order of Dawn

Going where Blizzard didn't dare to tread



Developer: JoWood ■ Publisher: JoWood ■ Distributor: Red Ant ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: TBC ■ Available: Now

Thanks to the success of games like Deus Ex we are becoming witness to more and more attempts to blend two separate genres together to create something new. Often the result of such a coupling is a bit disheartening but once in a while it works, creating a game that is fresh and enjoyable. The latest successful co-joining of two genres is Phenomic's debut title Spellforce: The Order of Dawn, the result of taking a standard RTS and liberally adding features found in most RPGs to the mix.

Where Warcraft III was somewhat cautious in what RPG elements were absorbed into the gameplay, Spellforce is less hesitant. Unlike most RTS titles your main concern in Spellforce is the development of your in-game persona rather than a horde of faceless units. After a tutorial that explains the basics of unit creation, resource collection and combat your first task is building up your avatar. As you complete quests for local townsfolk you meet making your way through the wilderness, you eventually come into possession of rune stones. These stones give you the power to summon workers to construct your base or hero units to act as generals in your army.

Each level typically consists of a variety of sub-quests that can be pursued by your avatar, in addition to a linear series of story critical missions. Here the

game takes on a strong RTS flavor and requires familiar tasks such as resource collection and base construction to take out an opposing army. The rewards of completing these quests and toppling opposing armies are the numerous treasures they drop. From mundane weaponry to powerful artifacts this loot enables you to increase the power and capabilities of your avatar and hero units. You will even find additional runes with which to summon the armies of other races or even more powerful heroes to accompany you.

Stirring score

Spellforce won't be remembered for its visuals but the game's engine portrays a delightful 3D world. One highlight is the ability to zoom right down from a standard tactical view to a close up third person view of your avatar where upon you take direct control. The view offers no real tactical advantage but nonetheless you will find yourself using it often, for aesthetics alone. Being able to walk through the streets of your base and see everyone so hard at work is an enchanting experience and serves to heighten your connection with the game.

Assisted by a stirring orchestral score and an interesting, if somewhat clichéd, storyline, Spellforce is an absorbing and unique take on the RTS genre. As you

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

If you find the expansive single player game was not enough to quench your thirst for its unique gamestyle then it will please you to hear that the first Spellforce expansion pack has just hit European store shelves. Entitled Breath of Winter, the expansion continues to the storyline started in the original title and takes your wandering warrior to new lands and new adventures. Introducing two new races along with another meaty single player campaign, Breath of Winter has already been receiving favorable press. With one expansion already gold and yet another on the way the future is looking bright for the Spellforce community.

progress you will become steadily addicted to the development of your character and the increasing power of your armies. Despite the almost formulaic approach to each level it is rare you will find yourself bored or looking for more variety. It may lack the tightness of design that a more experienced developer would bring but Spellforce is an extremely fulfilling meal for the gamer hungry with something with a different flavour.

Nathan Cocks

SYSTEM

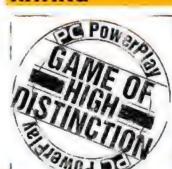
NEED
Win98/Me/XP
1GHz CPU
256 MB RAM
32 MB Video
2 GB HD

WANT
1.8GHz CPU
512 MB RAM
64 MB Video

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

ONLINE
www.planetspellforce.com
A companion for the game that explains all the things the manual didn't

RATING



OVERALL
An incredibly satisfying mix of Diablo and Warcraft

89





Savage

I want to RTSFPS you like an animal

Developer: S2 ■ **Publisher:** Digital Jester ■ **Distributor:** TBC ■ **Price:** TBC ■ **Rating:** TBC ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-667
128MB RAM
GeForce2
Net connection

WANT

P4-1GHz+
256MB RAM
GeForce4+
Broadband net

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.michaelsavageworld.com

The left-wingers are coming to get us! US conspiracy theorist. Buy his book. Or rather, don't.

RATING



OVERALL

Solid design often let down by your fellow players

72

This latest attempt to blend RTS and FPS hit US shelves some time toward the end of last year and we've only just been able to get our hands on a copy. On the up side, this means that there are plenty of players around for this online-only multiplayer-only game.

Savage is a low-tech fantasy in the sense that it's all about spells and swords, rather than guns and butter. Set several million years in the future, why not, animals and humans fight each other for domination of the sacred whatever.

In practice, this means you can build from steel and fire or wood and bulldust, depending on your preference.

Fancy schmancy

If this all sounds like a typical RTS so far, take a step back. Savage is a veritable chimera of a game, with the head of an FPS, the body of an RTS and the tail of an MMORPG.

As mentioned, the game is online only. Log in to the main server and jump into a game. You can take the part of any of a number of units or try your hand as the commander.

The game world is rather plain, with blocky objects and simple textures, but this keeps things moving along at a swift pace and allows for 64 players in any single mission - 31 versus 31 on the battlefield and two commanders.

As a commander, your role is fairly traditional. Click on worker units to have them collect resources, click on buildings to, well, build or upgrade them. However, beyond the usual stuff, you're also able to give rewards of money and items to the other players on your team, perhaps for correctly following orders or perhaps just because you like them.

The commander can also direct other players to build, repair, gather resources or attack the hell out of the opposition. Once an order has been issued, an action bar appears in the top of the player's screen as well as a compass arrow showing where the order needs to be carried out.

This fixes one of the main problems with these kinds of games - expecting the 'units' to remember what the hell it was they were supposed to be doing.

Animal cunning

As a unit, you run around the battlefield either doing what you're told or making trouble. Every time you do something you collect gold, some of which goes to the war effort (tax, if you like) and some of which can be spent according to your violent whims. Upgrade your weapons, get new abilities, and if you're especially efficient as a killer, your commander may even reward you with a support spell or special ability.

MEGA VALUE PAKZOR

Our edition of Savage came jam-packed with slightly desperate-seeming extras such as an official strategy guide, a "free upgrade" to the latest version, expansion packs, some user-made mods and a bunch of extra maps. But given that the game itself seems a little sparse at times, it comes across as less of a cornucopia as perhaps it should.

So does it all work? Like all games of this type, success in Savage depends heavily not so much on how well you play with others, but how well others play with you. The game has been around for several months now, so there are more than a few overly-serious hardcore fanboys to deal with online. Apart from the fanboys, you've got your standard idiots who just want to run around and attack anything and everything until they get killed. Finally, you have newbies who think the game is a standard RTS and don't understand why their units don't respond to their commands, and then impeach the newbie after six consecutive defeats.

Every now and then you do get a good game, and when Savage works, it works well. It's plain, but it has a few tricks up its sleeve. And online play is free.

Anthony Fordham





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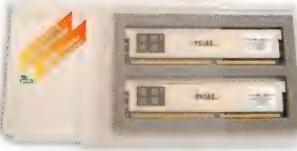
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Soldner: Secret Wars

Not so secret any more

Developer: Wings Simulations ■ **Publisher:** JoWood ■ **Distributor:** Red Ant ■ **Price:** \$69.95 ■ **Rating:** MA 15+ ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1.4GHz CPU
256MB Memory
GeForce 3 or better

WANT

2.5GHz CPU
1GB memory
GeForce 6800GT

MULTIPLAYER

Yes, 32 player

ONLINE

dict.leo.org
Use this German dictionary to find out what Soldner actually means. Surprisingly it's not below average game.

BIt's hard to say where Soldner went wrong. When shooter fans were first treated to the initial batch of impressive screenshots there was a lot to get excited about. As well as having all of the necessary ingredients for a successful online shooter, such as drivable vehicles, massive maps and support for 32 players, it also promised a few new twists to the genre. Who wouldn't appreciate the fully destructible terrain, and with an armoury bigger than an American democracy mission, it promised to be the game to satisfy lovers of high explosives.

Being a fan of things that go boom, I was one of those who were eagerly anticipating what this title had to offer. Yet within minutes of installing it onto my hard drive, it soon became clear that Soldner was not what I was expecting.

Upon hitting the campaign button, I was immediately greeted with a crash to the Windows desktop. Reload the game, and it happens again. A quick patch later, and I finally managed to get into the campaign. Surprise, surprise, the crashmonster chomps my game yet again. One reboot later and I'm finally standing in the middle of a barren base camp, staring at graphics that would make Operation Flashpoint chuckle.

PLAY DRESS-UPS

Soldner has an extensive character customisation screen at the beginning of the game. According to the bottom of the box there are 60,000 different combinations of different bits of clothing. Unfortunately, no matter how hard you try it seems that your character always looks like he's either going to a German hardcore rave or is wearing a puffy army jacket. Bizarre.



RATING



OVERALL

Unfinished, unpolished, and unworthy of your attention

35



Walking over to a small satellite receiver, my first objective is dished out to me with a short, sterile mission description killing any hint of atmosphere. In the blink of an eye the weather is suddenly transformed to a howling snow storm, and I hop into the nearest jeep. Two kilometres later I see the objective – a couple of guys standing outside a bunker, doing their finest impression of mindless zombies. I take the first down, and watch as his pal simply stands there unmoving, daydreaming about when he'll get to be a part of a real computer game. Pow, he's gone, and I drive back to the base, wondering how long it will be before I fall asleep. Soon the missions move into vehicle based ones, and it soon becomes apparent how woeful the control system for these is. If you thought the choppers in Desert Combat were bad, you ain't seen nothin'.

Ok, so the singleplayer blows, but so does Battlefield's. Let's see what this baby can do online. Not much, it soon appears.

After struggling to find a server, I'm soon dealing with some of the worst netcode I've ever had to put up with. The distance to the server probably isn't helping, but it's still no excuse for how bad this game is performing.

The fact that I've been sinking some heavy duty time into Joint Operations probably didn't do this game any favours. They both target the same genre, but JO is happy to simply evolve existing gameplay standards, and thus doesn't overreach. The result is a highly polished, highly enjoyable game. But Soldner aimed way too high, and as a result has totally missed the mark.

Bennett Ring



Soldiers: Heroes of WWII

And we thought tanks were the real heroes...

Developer: Codemasters ■ **Publisher:** Codemasters ■ **Distributor:** Atari ■ **Price:** \$89.95 ■ **Rating:** M15+ ■ **Available:** Now

Ghandi once said that there is always a limit to self-indulgence, but none to self-restraint. While I'm pretty sure the famed pacifist and orator was not speaking about computer games, when playing Soldiers: Heroes of World War II it is easy to agree with the old guy. Drawing heavily on the style of gameplay introduced in games like Commandos this squad based RTS is perhaps the most detailed game of its type ever made. Alas this is not necessarily a good thing.

The attention to detail exhibited in Soldiers is staggering. The graphics engine alone is a startling monument to minutiae. High resolution textures and detailed unit models create a visually enticing canvas upon which to paint a war. Trees rustle as troops pass through, bored soldiers will smoke cigarettes, glass falls realistically from windows as they are blown apart by nearby mortar fire. At times it feels as though you are playing with a hobbyist's train set, everything is just so exact.

TAKE CONTROL

One area that sets Soldiers apart from similar titles is in the use of its Direct Control function. With a press of the end key, Soldiers allows you to take over a single unit and direct it in a manner not dissimilar to a third person shooter; moving with the keyboard and aiming with the mouse. This is particularly enjoyable in vehicles such as tanks where the feel of controlling some 45 tonne of destruction can be quite intoxicating. What at first seems like a gimmick quickly becomes an essential for victory as units under your direct control tend to be much more effective.



Brutal

This attention to detail carries over to the gameplay and it is here where you begin to wish that developer Best Way exhibited an element of the aforementioned self-restraint. From individual inventory screens for each unit, to the need to keep your vehicles well fueled (even if that means siphoning gas from other vehicles), nothing has been overlooked. This may sound fantastic but there is a definite problem of overloading the gamer with menial tasks not all of which are actually enjoyable to play out.

With so much going on it is easy to feel overwhelmed by Soldiers. The game operates on a brutal difficulty level where even the easy setting seems a misnomer. The forces you have to fight are generally several times your own number and much better equipped. As mortar shells fall about your team it is all too easy to become lost trying to keep track of everything. In the end progression is made by a largely trial and error method which is often more frustrating than fun.

Cartwheeling

Despite this difficulty with both the objectives you must accomplish and the number of variables you need to manage, Soldiers still manages to captivate. The

SYSTEM

NEED
Windows 98SE/ME/2000/XP
1GHz CPU
256MB RAM
32MB Graphics card
300MB HDD

WANT
2GHz CPU
512MB RAM
DirectX 9 Video Card
300MB HDD

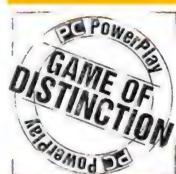
MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.worldwarhistory.com/Medals-of-Honor
Fascinating tales of the real life heroes of World War II

RATING



OVERALL
Taking on Hitler has never been this detailed... or difficult

78

Nathan Cocks



Desert Rats vs Afrika Korps

It's all about the tanks

Developer: Digital Reality ■ **Publisher:** Monte Cristo ■ **Distributor:** QV Software ■ **Price:** \$49.95 ■ **Rating:** G8+ ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED
Win98/Me/XP
1GHz CPU
256MB RAM
64MB Video
1GB HDD

WANT

1.4GHz CPU
512MB RAM
64MB Video

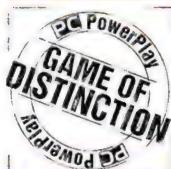
MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

www.infantry.com/dartz/
Index online
If you love large tread
mounted phallic
weaponry this is the
site for you

RATING



OVERALL

Tank lovers rejoice!
Shame about the
rest of the game.

75

Ever wondered what Casablanca would be like as an RTS? Granted, it is an unusual question to open a review with but after playing Desert Rats vs. Afrika Korps, one that seems apt. The tale of love, camaraderie and sacrifice that ties the single player campaign together feels like it was lifted directly from the screenplay of any 1940s Warner Bros war epic. It may not be the most competent RTS available but the presentation of its campaign in such a classic fashion is worthy of praise.

One thing Desert Rats does well, outside of aping films from the first half of last century, is tanks and tank combat. If the imagery of interlocked metal slabs slamming down on the desert sand to crush the sun bleached bones of your enemies gets you hot under the collar then you will definitely find something to enjoy here. In fact if Desert Rats had sought to be nothing more than a tank warfare title, then chances are it would have been a better game. Unfortunately the developers thought that just

controlling tank battalions wasn't enough.

A good RTS gives the gamer a limited number of units to become intimately knowledgeable about; using that knowledge to create clever strategies focused on capitalising on strengths and obviating weaknesses. Desert Rats on the other hand throws so many units at you that understanding the strategic merit of each becomes a fool's errand. Even in the event that you do manage to understand where all the pieces fit, a clunky control interface means that managing them in the thick of things is next to impossible.

Ultimately it is the unit pathfinding that erects the most significant barrier to enjoyment in this game. Getting your team from point A to point B can be extremely frustrating, especially when only half the team manage to make it by the end anyway. If, by chance, you find yourself needing to manoeuvre vehicles through your own troops you are even required to move infantry aside manually before sending through the tanks.

These frustrations are a shame since

Various environmental changes require you to adjust your strategy if you are to survive



HARD-KORPS

Despite first appearances the words Afrika Korps are not deliberately misspelt Driv3r-esque as means to appeal to 'the kids' (to whom poor spelling is a major status symbol apparently). Instead the Deutsches Afrika Korps was the name of an elite German tank corps that swept across the blasted landscape of Northern Africa under the command of Erwin Rommel. Refusing to order his men to do what he would not do himself, Rommel was well admired as a general and fellow soldier. As the old Afrika Korps saying goes: "Where Rommel is, there the front is."

the combat is actually a lot of fun. Rather than battles being decided by superior numbers there is a significant degree of strategy involved. The use of hard cover and being aware of where the strongest armour on vehicles is located means a little thought is required if you are to turn the battle in your favour. The various environmental changes from open desert to closed in urban surrounds also require you adjust your strategy if you wish to survive.

There is fun to be found in Desert Rats, it is by no means a disaster, but for every positive the game raises there is a negative to drag it back down. Gorgeous visuals, sound and some well thought out gameplay inclusions fall down under the weight of an obtuse interface and extremely frustrating pathing AI. If you are prepared to put up with the inadequacies you will find a competent and enjoyable RTS lying beneath. For most of us though the effort is too much.

Nathan Cocks



In Memoriam

This ain't how we remember adventure gaming

Developer: Lexis Numérique ■ **Publisher:** Ubisoft ■ **Distributor:** Ubisoft ■ **Price:** \$29.95 ■ **Rating:** M ■ **Available:** ????

Here's the set-up: there's this serial killer called Phoenix and he's sent you his game disk. As you play his games, and prove yourself worthy, he reveals clues to the whereabouts of his two latest victims.

This pretend-I'm-not-a-game set-up extends beyond your usual gaming dimensions and into the really-real world. At the beginning of the game you enter an e-mail address and then you get messages from your crime-fighting colleagues, interested third parties and even the killer himself. What's more, to solve many of the puzzles, you have to go on to the web and track down clues or vital information via real and game-specific websites.

As you go along you get to see more and more of the victims' video log that leads you into a decades old murder and then to Phoenix himself. The video is surprisingly well done, but you really want to get into the pretend-I'm-not-a-game spirit or you'll start wondering things like "what type of journalist, following a decades old murder case, takes the time to add a soundtrack to his handy-cam video log?"

Overlooking little details is the real secret to getting into this game. If you do that, there's a lot to like here. For one, it's different. EA tried something similar with its failed Majestic but even so, it's still

MAJESTIC INNOVATION

Back in 2001 EA launched a game called Majestic. Using the term game sells this experience short, however. Just like In Memoriam, Majestic was a psychological thriller and just like In Memoriam, it didn't stick to the usual boundaries of a game. This puppy would e-mail you, send you faxes and even phone calls all in an effort to immerse you in the game world. It seems that it was all too much. So few people signed up that EA pulled the game about half-way through the mystery. I guess you can only leave the classroom so many times saying: "Sorry, I have to take this threatening call..."

miles away from your standard adventure game and about six worlds away from your usual blow-the-psychos-away shooter experience.

Smells like cheese

Another plus is that the arty side of the game is top notch. The music is great, the puzzles suitably surreal, the websites professional and the simple interface takes a good run at being haunting.

While the delivery is top-notch the content can't quite keep up. The pop-

psychology and occult rituals taste a little of plastic, or maybe of cheese. Now I might have watched too many episodes of Profiler and Millennium but it all seems a little familiar.

Then there are the perils of mixing real-world elements with a game.

There's the technical stuff to worry about, like the way the game likes to reset your open web-browser and links to game patches that aren't there or the fact your searches for clues bring up more In Memoriam walk-throughs than leads.

Oh dah-ling

The whole puzzle system is a bit of a mixed bag. Some are great and others make you feel like Phoenix is running a virtual course in homicidal rage. One of my favourites involves having to learn the layout of various symbols in a famous building. There's no floor plan with the right markings so you have to scour the 'net and piece together tourist shots. Boy, look at me investigate! On the other end of the scale, you also get serial killer mini-golf.

Many of these darlings don't come with instructions which is a cool feel-your-way-through-the-mind-of-a-killer thing ... until you get stuck. Perhaps you've missed a vital e-mail or perhaps the obvious webpage where the information happens to be in French.

If you look at In Memoriam in parts like a strict puzzle or adventure game, then you'll probably find its tasks a bit too mechanical and cold. If, on the other hand, you look at it as a larger interactive experience – one that is mature, moody and offers new gameplay experiences – then In Memoriam fares much better and, at \$29.95, is a fine curiosity if nothing else.

Timothy C. Best

SYSTEM

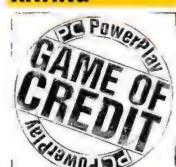
NEED
P333
64Mb RAM
32bit Videocard
700Mb HDD space
Internet connection
E-mail account

WANT
P500
128Mb RAM
32Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER
Not with real people

ONLINE
WWW.FAYCHICK.COM
In Memoriam.

RATING



OVERALL
Okay as a game; much better as an interactive experience.

66





Spider-Man 2

Did the Green Goblin develop this game?

Developer: Amaze ■ **Publisher:** Activision ■ **Distributor:** Activision ■ **Price:** \$69.95 ■ **Rating:** G8+ ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED

16MB DX9 compatible video card
600MHz CPU
128MB RAM

WANT

1.5GHz CPU,
GeForce 4 or better
256MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.ohmygosh.com/marvelous.htm
After playing this game you'll probably need to head here for some online therapy

RATING



OVERALL

Looks nice for exactly 17 seconds, before the realisation of absolute suckiness sets in.

17

When a game is ported from the PC to the consoles, it goes through a process known as "dumbing down". This allows elitist PC gamers to feel superior over their console brethren, as well as helping them to feel better about the fact that they paid several thousand dollars more for their platform of choice. Well, that's the way it's supposed to work. Spider-Man 2 flies in the face of this age old tradition, providing the PC with a watered down version of the console game. Can you hear the industrial sized alarm bells ringing yet?

notice the vastly increased pop-up of buildings. Oh dear. Not long after that you'll realise that only a fraction of the pedestrians and traffic are present in the PC version, giving the city a lifeless, sterile feeling. The fact that every character is animated as well as a grade 3 class project in stop motion animation doesn't help either.

According to the developers of this game, who probably won't remain developers for much longer, the PC version was targeted at a younger audience than the console versions. I'm

fact remains that one of the coolest features of the console games has been totally removed from the PC version. Instead of the immensely enjoyable and somewhat realistic (if you can call shooting web between your wrist and building corners realistic) control scheme of the console versions, in the PC version you simply aim the cursor at a small web icon and Spidey does the rest. Wake me when this game is finished uninstalling from my hard drive thanks.

The whole free form, "Grand Theft Auto" mechanics of the console versions is also absent. Sending this sinking ship to the bottom of the ocean is the woeful combat system, which is incredibly simplified.

It's hard to believe how different the PC version of Spidey's latest outing is when compared to the kick-ass console versions. If only it had been a direct port we're sure most PC gamers would have purchased a control pad solely for the ability to live as everybody's favourite neighbourhood Spider-man. Unfortunately this spider has been given a thorough Mortein shower, before being left to twitch around on its back and die a slow, painful death.

Bennett Ring

Wake me when this game is finished uninstalling from my hard drive thanks

I've spent many a fine hour on the Xbox version of this game, swinging away to my hearts content, tracking down baddies for a bit of biffo in a replica of New York City. Needless to say I was looking forward to the PC port.

At first glance the PC version looks much nicer than the console versions thanks to the infinitely higher resolution and more detailed textures. And then you

not sure about you, but I always assumed it was the other way around; that PC gamers tended to be a bit older than the console generation. We think a more likely reason for simplifying the aerial action in Spider-Man 2 is the fact that most PCs don't have a control pad. Yet a control pad is absolutely crucial for the controls to remain faithful to the console versions.

Regardless of why it happened, the

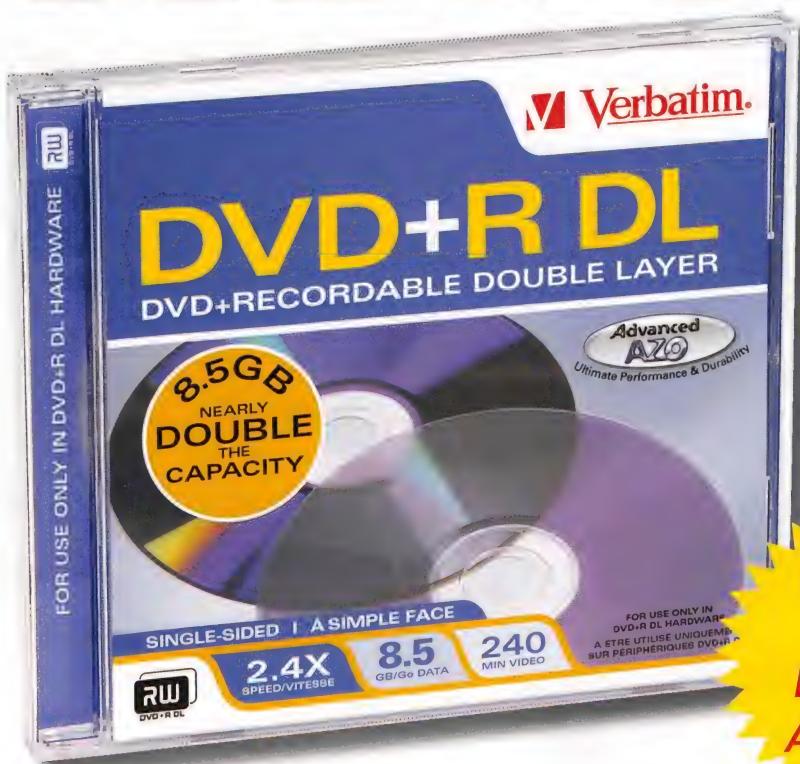
I HEAR VOICES

One of the few redeeming features of the game is the voice talent used in the game. While having Toby Maguire doing Spidey's lines is cool, it pales into comparison next to the absolutely brilliant decision to have Bruce Campbell (the legendary Evil Dead star) shooting sarcastic training tips at you. Pure genius - pity about the rest of the game.



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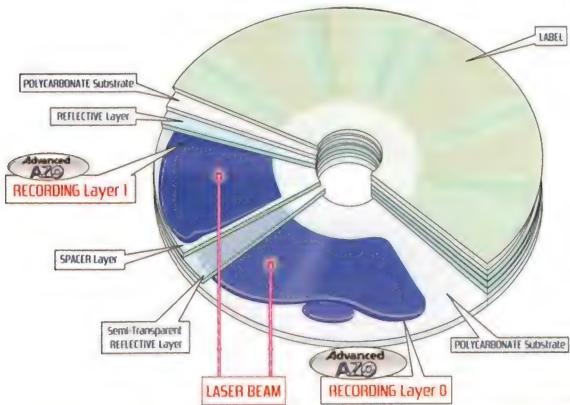
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Alias

AKA Generic Action/Adventure

Developer: Acclaim Studios ■ **Publisher:** Acclaim ■ **Distributor:** Acclaim ■ **Price:** \$49.95 ■ **Rating:** M15+ ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED

1GHz CPU
256Mb RAM
32bit Videocard
1.2Gb HDD space

WANT

P2GHz+
512Mb RAM
64Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.technicommunity.com/nowcast/

Don't know your Rambaldi from your ravioli? Here are some entertainingly harsh plot break-downs

The Alias TV show began as a simple tale of a gal trying to juggle a normal life with being a spy who's spying on the spies she's meant to be spying for. After a season it dumped all the secret life malarkey and just went nuts on conspiracy theories, elaborate betrayals, explosions and Jennifer Garner being filmed in as little as possible.

As you can imagine, the game tries to capture all of the spy action and some of Jennifer's babe-o-matic appeal. It borrows freely from third-person action and stealth conventions and then tries to appeal to the casual gamer by sliding the difficulty scale down on the combat and mini-games; while trying to appeal to hardcore gamers through extensive combat options and a tough stealth component.

What we get is like the pop-corn version of Splinter Cell, but with low-fat butter and a box that kind of crumples if you hold it too tightly.

For one, the action has control problems. In combat Sydney launches

DEUSEXY

Lock picking involves a wheel with certain little pieces of pie sticking out. You press the direction button towards the offending pieces and they start jumping in and out. When you press the action button they click in place. Sometimes you have to worry about the order of pressing the direction key. Whoa. When it comes to the computer hacking, you get an action packed memory game that forces you to get three out of four letters in the right order while the computer tells you how many you have in the right place. Let's just say I expect better next time.

into attack routines – at semi-random targets – that only vaguely look like what you've mashed into the keyboard. It's like the game just fills in the blanks to keep up the pace. While this makes for good fight choreography, it doesn't do

wonders for your battle plan.

If you call up a counter attack or disarm (using block and special attack) then they will appear but then it's the required range and timing that seems to take up the randomness and run with it.

The fact that the controls are designed for a gamepad round out your battle woes with something as simple as dodging requiring players to hold down two keys plus hit the right mouse button.

Luckily, Sydney magically regenerates to full health if you wait long enough, and, even if the main alarms are tripped, she can take on pretty much any fight with a couple of disarms and mashing the attack buttons.

Don't look to stealth for relief. Guards alternate between blindness and having super-sight and sometimes they detect you with the Shining just before you bust a stealth kill. Add in the complexity of the guard routines and it's all too wishy-washy to give you a pay-off that's worth the extra care.

On the up side, the themes and feel of the game make the grade and there are some cool moments where you feel like you're in an Alias episode, but then there's all the gameplay that gets in the way. Luckily, mini-games won't offer too much resistance and, as I've mentioned, you can mash your way through the rest with well-animated combat moves that crash up and down the screen.

If I had a "Lazy Port" stamp it would get some use on this one, my friends. If you're a big fan of the show rent some casual thrills on a console version, otherwise do your PC a favour and go for the real-deal with the likes of Splinter Cell or Thief.



RATING



OVERALL

Jennifer Garner is a heck of a lot hotter in live action

53

Pop-corn Splinter Cell, but with low fat butter and a box that crumples if you hold it tightly



Timothy C. Best

THE WHOLE SEASON HAS
BEEN A SWEEPING
SUCCESS! YOU'RE THE
SHOOTING STAR OF THE
YEAR. THE 'GOLDEN
NEIGHBOUR' IS YOURS!



Neighbours from Hell

Satan lives on Ramsay Street

Developer: Encore ■ **Publisher:** JoWood ■ **Distributor:** Red Ant ■ **Price:** \$49.95 ■ **Rating:** M ■ **Available:** Now

With a little extra thinking, this could have been a great game instead of a fairly plodding puzzler. NFH gives you the opportunity to torture the living daylights out of your "evil" neighbour by playing a series of mean-spirited pranks on the poor bastard.

Yet, for some reason, the developer felt this was not reason enough to publish a whole game so it turns out Woody - the player - is not just torturing his neighbour for the hell of it. He's actually taking part in a (presumably illegal) reality TV show which the neighbour doesn't seem to realise he's part of. Therefore, the quest for supreme tricksiness becomes instead the quest for high ratings. Logical enough, I suppose.

Loki's local

Woody has a bunch of seasons split into episodes in which to win the coveted but counter-intuitive Golden Neighbour award. He can also reattempt certain episodes if he feels the ratings didn't turn out as high as perhaps they might. So yes, temporally, the game makes no sense.

NFH is a puzzler. Woody must sneak around his neighbour's shabby flat planting traps that range from the elaborate to the asinine. Devious devices designed to create frightening noises or simulate ghosts give way to the intellectual

mastery of stuffing a toilet roll down the toilet or putting smelly cheese in the neighbour's favourite "sniffing plant."

Naturally, Woody loses an episode (however bizarre that concept may seem) by getting caught by the neighbour, whereupon he somehow either gets sucked back in time or uses an off-screen amneso-ray on the neighbour to have another crack at irritating him.

In a culture brought up on the antics of Tom Green and Jackass, it's pretty mild stuff, like one of those Boy's Own mags you may have found in your father's (or even grandfather's) old toy chest. It's like Tom and Jerry which, let's face, wasn't really that funny.

The game uses a simple sprite-based engine to generate the colourful characters, but there's not much in the way of variety for us to look at. Each episode give you the same rooms, spiced up by a few different prank animations.

Short pants

And the game is short, even in this, the age of the short game. A bare couple of hours should see you through, and after you've finished all the seasons of the show, there's not much else to do except go back in time (you don't even get a time machine) in an attempt to boost the ratings and get that Golden Neighbour award.

SEMANTICS

Riddle me this: there are only two characters in this game, yet it's called Neighbours -plural- from Hell. Plus, despite the fact that Woody spends the whole game vandalising property that belongs to "the neighbour" (he has no name) it's this poor, long-suffering man who is apparently the eponymous "neighbour from hell." Why? Does Woody find it hellishly easy to torture the poor bastard? Is he a hellishly good sport about getting his microwave blown up? Is it because he's ugly? We may never know.

On the other hand, NFH doesn't try to be a big game. It knows its place as a novelty title designed to keep the bored amused for a couple of hours. It runs on just about any machine that can struggle the latest version of Windows, and even if its weird prism doors and ultra-forced perspective irritate you, at least they have character.

I guess the game has a sort of bent appeal to it that may raise a giggle or two, but mostly this is a short-lived software toy that will feel most at home in the bargain bin where you will undoubtedly first spot it.

Anthony Fordham

SYSTEM

NEED
P-166
64MB RAM
16MB Video card
130MB HDD

WANT
P-233
64MB RAM
32MB Video card
130MB HDD

MULTIPLAYER
No

ONLINE
[www.hbc.co.uk/
neighbours](http://www.hbc.co.uk/neighbours)
Discover everything
about your favourite
soap that happened
two years ago

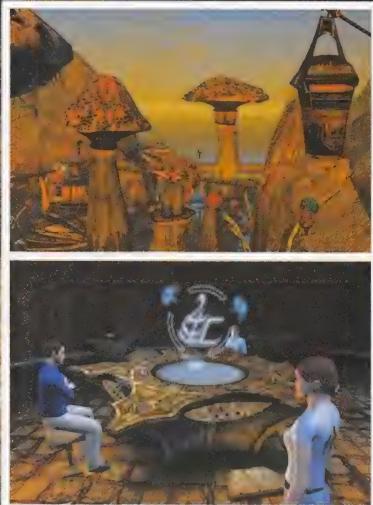
RATING

PC Powerplay
PASS

OVERALL
A stocking stuffer
only, six months too
early.

58





URU Gold The Complete Chronicles

The question is... who gave it a gold in the first place?



Developer: Cyan ■ **Publisher:** Ubisoft ■ **Distributor:** Ubisoft ■ **Price:** \$89.95 ■ **Rating:** G ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED
Win98SE/2000/ME/XP
800MHz CPU
256MB RAM
32MB DX9 Videocard
2.5GB HDD

WANT

1.4GHz CPU
512MB RAM
64MB DX9
Videocard

MULTIPLAYER

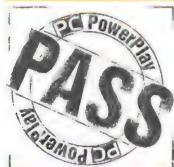
No

ONLINE

www.mystrevelation.com

Let's look to the future, eh?

RATING



OVERALL

Poor value for money for an average adventure

55

This is an odd release. The fourth installment in the Myst saga, URU: Ages Beyond Myst appeared late last year and swiftly disappeared under the gentle wash of indifference. "I'm Myst... but in glorious 3D!" it proclaimed to all and sundry. And so it was. Which may have been part of the problem.

For a start, the controls proved an absolute nightmare in both views - the awkward stagger of the third-person perspective or the gelatinous glide of the first-person mode. Apparently, a real-time 3D engine necessitates the inclusion of jumping puzzles. It must be a rule written in some design handbook with which I'm not familiar. Anyway, performing said jumps in either view is maddeningly problematic, especially when you fall to your death then need to reload and get back to whichever location witnessed your untimely demise.

Another troublesome aspect of the real-time 3D world is there's little guidance to where you should be going. The "on rails" approach of previous Myst titles meant the camera always pointed you towards something relevant or interesting; here you now spend most of your time wandering around trying to find something relevant or interesting. Surely the point should be the puzzles



themselves, not the poking around searching for the puzzles.

"I'm also Myst... but massively multiplayer!" it blurted to those still listening. And so it was. Except people didn't listen. People weren't interested in the idea of an online world where you looked at each other's books and discussed puzzle solutions. And so it was canned.

Insubstantial

Cyan, the game's developer, then decided to release some of the content they had planned for URU Online - the first bit, To D'Ni, was made available as a free download, while the second, The Path of the Shell, can be purchased on its own or with the original game in this URU Gold: The Complete Chronicles. So, to summarise, that's a relatively recent game plus two expansion packs for just under 90 bucks - a bargain, surely?

Ultimately the answer to that question depends on your appreciation of the original game. There's bafflingly little in the way of compelling new content in either add-on to warrant further investment. After playing both it's clear to see why To D'Ni first appeared in downloadable form - Cyan simply



DISAPPEARER

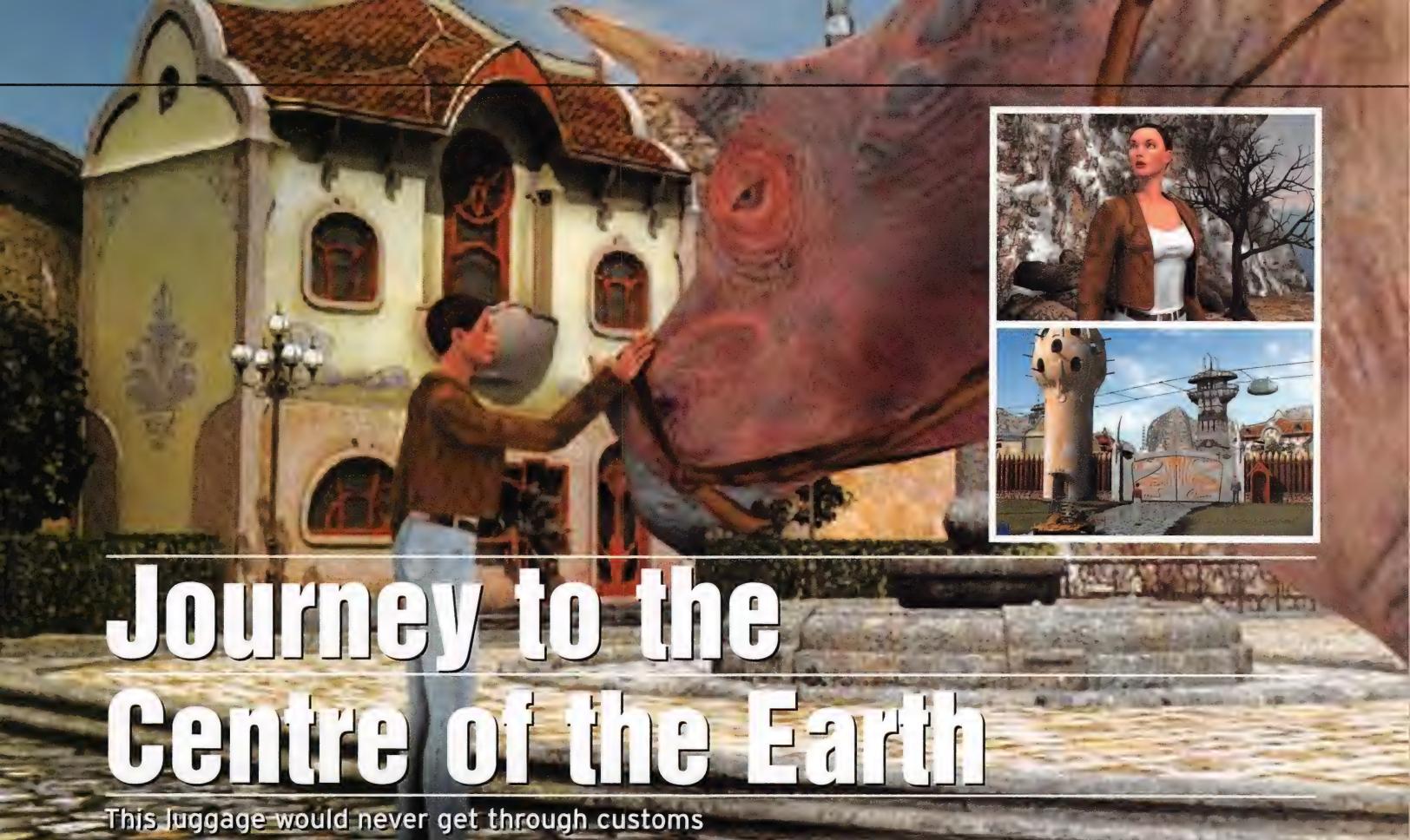
Curiously, much is made of the manner in which you can create and customize your in-game character or avatar. You can select their gender, tweak their physique, adjust their facial appearance and even outfit them in a variety of western fashion disasters. You can even give him or her a name. Possibly one that isn't yours. This means you can actually see yourself while playing from the default third-person view. It's like, wow, I'm really there. Great. Except for the minor issue that the third-person view is inferior to the first-person view in every way. It's particularly useless for navigating enclosed spaces like corridors, caves and rooms. So after all that work matching the colour of your eyes to your pants, you'll spend 99% of the time not even noticing.

couldn't justify charging for it, so as a goodwill gesture after the closure of the original's online aspect, it was successful.

The Path of the Shell continues the story of D'Ni, adding more substance but it's obvious someone's heart really just wasn't it any more. The experience is diluted through a host of forgettable puzzles and plenty of padding.

The good news is that Ubisoft has seen the error of their ways and the next Myst game, Revelation, reverts to the style of the earlier titles and is due out next month. The fact it's called Myst IV, despite being the fifth in the series, and is in development at Ubi's Montreal studios perhaps betrays exactly how the publisher feels about URU.

David Wildgoose



Journey to the Centre of the Earth

This luggage would never get through customs

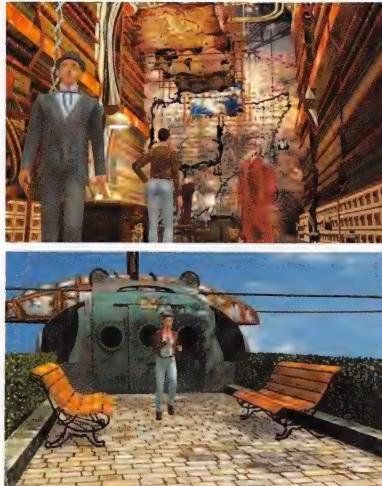
Developer: Frogwares ■ **Publisher:** Viva Media ■ **Distributor:** Viva Media ■ **Price:** \$49.95 ■ **Rating:** G8+ ■ **Available:** Now

I don't think I'm particularly stupid. In fact, thanks to a host of astronomical scores on various self-indulgent online IQ tests, I'm led to believe that I'm really quite intelligent. Logic problems, especially, are something at which I tend to excel. So it was with brimming confidence that I decided to tackle the latest game of puzzle-based adventuring from Red Ant.

However, Journey to the Torture of the Earth isn't so much a test of your intelligence as it is a trial of persistence. These are logic problems that defy logic, a series of obscure object-based conundrums so baffling that you'll need either a print-out of the full walkthrough within easy reach or several weeks of your life to waste by clicking on everything until you've exhausted every possible permutation of inventory and environmental hotspots. Developer Frogwares has carefully examined where every other post-Myst point-and-click adventure went horribly, hideously, horrifically wrong... and ensured each flaw was recreated here with painstakingly precision.

There are essential objects so tiny they occupy barely a couple of pixels - miss them (and, trust me, you will) and you'll be unable to progress until you consult that walkthrough. Oh you missed that microscopic chisel lying in the dark atop that barrel of the same colour? Sorry 'bout that.

There are puzzles that involve backtracking across countless screens to collect an essential item that didn't highlight as an interactive element when you were first in that location over an hour ago. Ah, but how did you know you would need the bellows to pump air into a giant shell in order to signal the pterodactyl? D'oh!



DRIVING BLIND

Perhaps the bulk of the blame should lie with the developer's decision to not offer any sort of "look" command. Instead the only clues as to what you should be doing come from the graphical depiction of each scene and the very occasional line of speech from Ariane, the protagonist. As such, when faced with the entrance to a cave she inexplicably refuses to enter, all you know is that "I can't leave here yet". Maybe a gentle hint that it's too dark to see might prompt the use of a cigarette lighter as a makeshift torch? Instead you'll just click randomly until you stumble upon the solution. The whole game's like that.

SYSTEM

NEED
500MHz CPU
64MB RAM
16MB Videocard

WANT
N/A

MULTIPLAYER
No

ONLINE

www.borobudur.com
Trudger is my friend.
She'll be yours too
if you buy this game.

Oh you missed that microscopic chisel lying in the dark atop that barrel of the same colour?

There are puzzles that require you to use one - and only one - object amongst a series of utterly identical such objects. I know, I'll just slice a strip of this giant mushroom to make a splint for a broken leg... yeah, that one mushroom past all the other mushrooms five screens away. Or when you're on a beach, but you can only collect sand from this little bit over here and not from every-bloody-where else that looks exactly the f***ing same.

Someone shoot me now, please.

At least that way I wouldn't have to endure puzzles based around following the instructions provided in riddles that still make absolutely no sense even once

you know the solution. Even the person who wrote the walkthrough I was so heavily reliant upon to get anywhere during this infuriating exercise had no idea why the solution was actually a solution. The only sane way anyone could conceivably solve this particular nightmare would be to methodically arrange twelve symbols in twelve slots until it worked. That's a total of nearly 500 million combinations.

I suspect you may need an IQ of a similar size to extract any enjoyment from this.

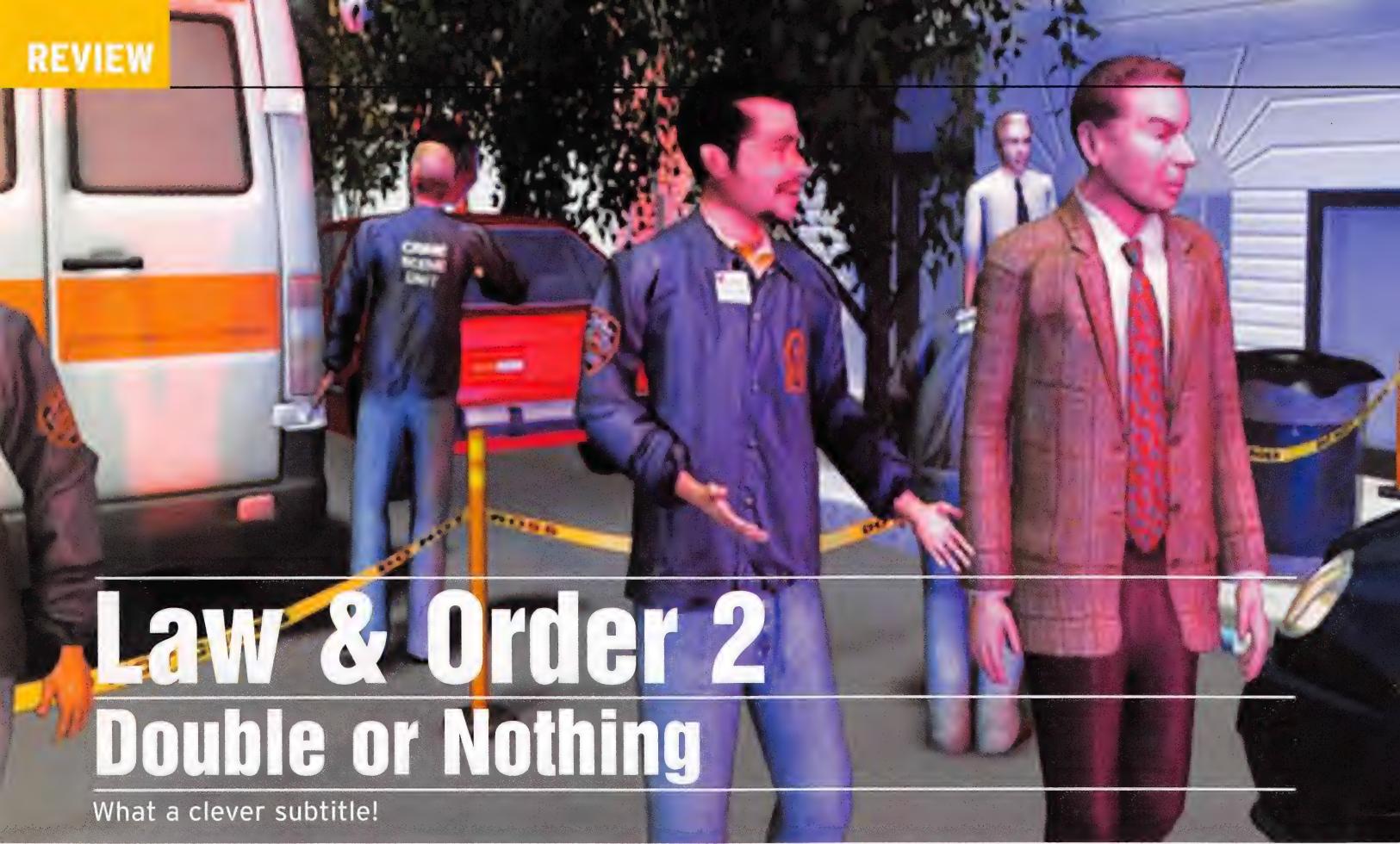
RATING



OVERALL
This is why
adventure gaming
is dead.

42

David Wildgoose



Law & Order 2 Double or Nothing

What a clever subtitle!

Developer: Legacy ■ **Publisher:** The Adventure Company ■ **Distributor:** QV Software ■ **Price:** \$ 49.95 ■ **Rating:** M ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED

Win 98/ME/2000/XP
500MHz CPU
16MB DX7
Videocard
650MB HDD

WANT

A different game?

MULTIPLAYER

Only when you get stuck!

ONLINE

www.power-of-attorneys.com/lawAgainst_it.htm

People are stupid,
especially if they're
American

Tack down the perp, if he turns out to be a Skel all the better for the collar, get him to the house quick smart and stick him in the pokey."

Surely cops become cops for the lingo. Because whether walking the beat or making your way around the city in a RMP (a marked police car) being a detective is a lot of work. And we haven't even got to my favourite and ultimately the most work - the subpoena. A word that sounds like it should have a double meaning but sadly is from the Latin sub poena meaning under penalty.

For 14 years Law & Order has been a highly successful television series spawning two well received spin off shows which now look certain to introduce a string of PC games based on the original. Law & Order II - Double or Nothing is a sequel, as the name suggests, to Dead on the Money and carries over the same methodology as the original with the game mirroring the structure of television show. Rarely do we find anything striking or innovative about a game based on TV/Film and Double or Nothing does not attempt to deviate from the formula.

While presentation is one of the game's strong points, with screens easy to manoeuvre between, structural issues cheapen a game that is essentially a simplistic adventure story. From the outset



LAWFULLY UNWED

Bored? Looking for something to do while online? Why not get divorced! Let's face it, the little woman is preventing you from doing what you long to do (which is obviously sitting around scratching yourself) so why not delete your spouse by going to www.divorce.com.au. There's no need for the legal system! And then you can legally call the cops and throw the bishatch out!

Quick to engage the player with swift plot development and a number of twists and turns

it looked like I would be playing the same game with only slight variation on the plot and minor interface adjustments. However while I found the first version of the game slow and somewhat tiresome Double or Nothing is quick to engage the player with swift plot development and a number of twists and turns. Thankfully the developers opted to remove the 4 day time limit that disrupted the flow of the first game allowing gamers to take their time to search for clues or think out the logical question instead of randomly clicking as quickly as possible to beat the clock.

The game's legal interface has been dumbed down and you no longer need to have a Law degree to navigate through the legal terms, even objecting is easier and more fun because the judge doesn't reject you every time you open your mouth.

Sadly the game suffers from a handful of glitches, carried over from the first game, including the dreaded freezing up of your computer and instances where you

click into a void instead of a close up look at a clue. It made my crime solving impossible because I couldn't get my subpoena without the vital clue. Equally annoying is being required to hit Done or X after everything you do and then click or hit space bar to get back to the menu. I can only guess that this is to add time it takes to finish what is a reasonably short adventure game.

I carried with me through the game the feeling that I'd watched this story play out in front of me before during one of the repeated ad nauseum episodes, except quicker and with less thought on my part.

Double or Nothing doesn't allow you to get as involved with the story as most would like, with autopsies, research and surveillance all completed in miraculously quick time by invisible forces. All the time I felt that something was missing; where is Grissom when you need him!

Vanessa Morgan

RATING



OVERALL

Er... you're nicked, sunshine?

62



INTERNET.AU

The Internet...
unplugged



PEOPLE
TRENDS
TECH

FLAMES, LIES & POLITICS

<blink>

ENTERTAINMENT </blink>

POINTS OF VIEW

A second look at the most significant releases of the past few months



THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS

'...a very special PC game.' is how Eliot summed up Thief: Deadly Shadows back in issue 102. Two months later and the truth of that summation still rings clear. Ion Storm exceeded expectations by not just creating a worthy chapter in a well loved series but by creating the best.

Easily the most immersive PC game in a very long time, Deadly Shadows lets you slip into the padded soles of Garrett and truly take on the role of master thief. Robbing religious zealots, socialites and anyone fool enough to hang their purse from their belt has never been more fun. Only a burruck would miss this.

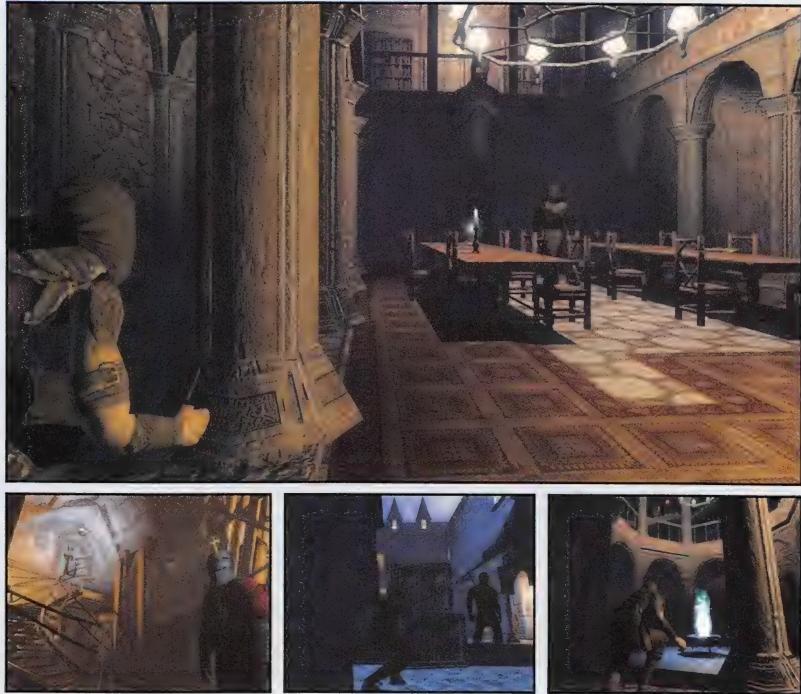
Nathan Cocks

That Thief: Deadly Shadows deserves its Gold Award is a no-brainer: this is how PC gaming should be. Thief hasn't been developed, it's been engineered. It tells us yes, there is hope. Yes, having a massively expensive, overpowered juggernaut of a gaming system is worth it, because the smartness of the PC breeds the smartness of games like this.

Yet for all its brave-new-worldery, Thief is also remarkable because it reminds us of the way PC games used to be, before big-business got its hooks into them. It doesn't try to be all things to all players, or the next amazing blockbuster. It's just itself.

Thief: Deadly Shadows is an essential part of your collection. You must own this game.

Anthony Fordham



BATTLEFIELD VIETNAM

Our review of Battlefield Vietnam was based on a single day of LAN play with 12 other guys, a few days worth of single player, and months of BF1942 experience. We had a ball during our LAN test so gave it the thumbs up, but it took an extended test for BF:V's problems to surface, a common problem when reviewing multiplayer titles.

The biggest of the problems that we've since discovered is the map design. All of BF:V's maps are much smaller than BF1942's, resulting in less routes to each capture point and thus more predictable battles. They also seem to lack the well thought out geography of BF1942's maps, which can lead to a lack of those special Battlefield moments that are so common in the original.

Other problems include the dated game interface, which still hasn't been patched to match BF1942's, while gun worshippers continue to be appalled at the inaccurate gun models. Poor network and graphics performance hasn't helped the game either, but a recent patch helped to rectify this problem.

We still think there's a lot of fun to be had with this game, but somehow Vietnam has diluted the magic of the original Battlefield 1942. Oh yeah, we still hate that bloody grass...

Bennett Ring

FAR CRY

I don't *get* Far Cry. I don't *get* what the fuss is all about. Okay, sure, I understand why plenty of gamers have worked themselves into a lather over it these past few months. It looks pretty, for a start, which is nice. And the maps are huge – and as we all know, if something's big it simply must be good. There are vehicles, too. (*Always with the vehicles.*) Apparently the AI is great because, um... the enemies don't always do the same thing or something. And, er... gee, doesn't the water look inviting?

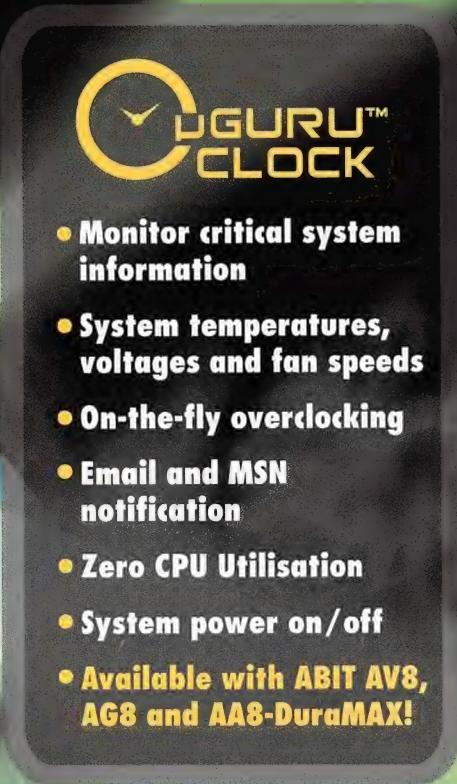
But, honestly, it's just a tech demo. Crytek spent years working on an engine capable of rendering large outdoor environments and then slapped a game – by which I mean a few enemies, waypoints and guns – on top of it in the months prior to release. Didn't they?

Far Cry is one the least interesting shooters in recent years, almost entirely devoid of imagination in terms of level design, objectives or narrative. Beyond its obvious eye candy appeal, there's little reason to keep playing. I really don't get it...

David Wildgoose



The 3rd Eye...



...see what others can't

ABIT's legendary reputation for innovation in the enthusiast PC market has reached new heights, with the release of the new **3rd Eye**. Utilising ABIT's **pGuru** technology, the **3rd Eye** allows you to effortlessly monitor and make active adjustments on such vital system statistics and settings as CPU frequency, preset overclocking levels, fan speeds and hardware voltages - via a remote LCD display, without any interruption to your programs! **3rd Eye** can even alert you of incoming emails and MSN messages!



ABIT's 3rd Eye is available with all ABIT AA8-DuraMAX, AG8 and AV8 motherboards.


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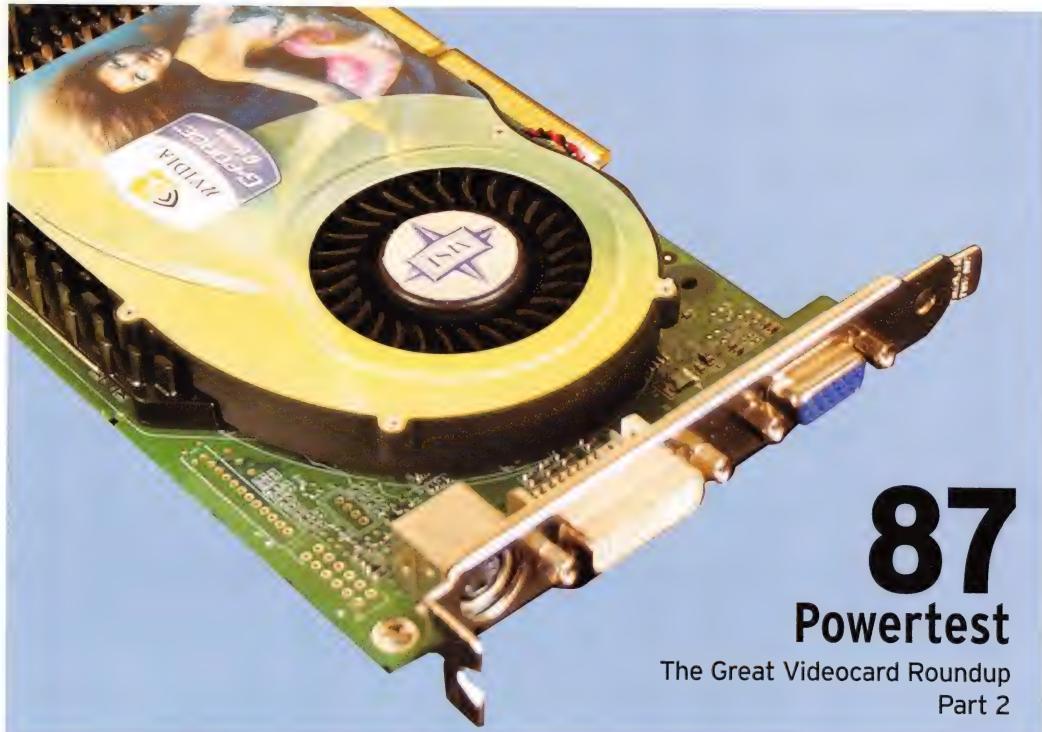
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www.tasmaniampc.com.au

TECH IN REVIEW

We were hoping to get our mitts on AMD's PCI Express platform this month, but it didn't happen. However, we did finally see the arrival of AMD's Socket 939 solution. So, what's the big deal about this, I pretend to hear you ask? Well, it's important for two reasons. Firstly, AMD's CPUs have now been consolidated onto one Socket. Instead of having Socket 754 for standard Athlon 64s and Socket 940 for the FX range of cash chewers, both CPU lines will now be running on Socket 939. About bloody time.

But the best thing for mere mortals who can't afford an FX is that we now have dual channel memory for the Athlon 64. Does this result in increased performance? Well, it's not quite that simple; with one hand AMD giveth, with the other they taketh away. To balance out the use of dual channel memory, AMD has removed one of the performance boosting components of the Athlon 64. You can read Jason's review to find out what that part is...

If you delve into the massive graphs in our PowerTest, you'll see that NVIDIA's GeForce 6800 Ultra has closed the gap with the X800XT Platinum Edition. When we first compared these two cards a couple of months ago, ATI walked away as the winner, albeit by a small margin. However, it looks like NVIDIA's driver gurus have been hard at work, and the 6800 Ultra has caught up to, if not passed, the X800XT PE in many respects. Unfortunately it appears that the 6800 Ultra still has a little work to do when it comes to anisotropic filtering and antialiasing.



87 PowerTest

The Great Videocard Roundup
Part 2

Having said that, some impressive Doom 3 benchmarks came out just before we put this issue to bed. As I write this, my personal copy of Doom 3 arrives in a few days, and I've got a 6800 Ultra and an X800XT PE to give it a thorough workout. Expect the results next issue... provided I haven't scared myself into a coma while playing it.

Bennett Ring
Deputy Editor
bennettr@next.com.au

- 94 Socket 939
- 96 Hercules DJ Console
- 98 DVD drive shootout
- 100 Case shootout
- 101 Samsung LCD screen
- 101 Xclef HD MP3 player

HOW WE TESTED

For an in-depth explanation of how we test video cards, CPUs, and motherboards head to our PowerTools section on page 102. You'll also see a list of hardware that makes up the PCPP testbenches, which are used for the testing of the majority of our hardware.

Where possible we use benchmarks based on real world games to test hardware performance; this way we know for sure which component will give you the best gaming experience. We don't love hardware for hardware's sake - it's all about using this hardware to make your entertainment

even more, well, entertaining. We also try to compare the review product with the current "best of class" piece of hardware, so at the end of the day you'll know exactly which product offers you the best bang for buck.

For a product to earn a Power Award, price be damned, we're just looking at how this product performs. If there's nothing better, that we've seen at least, it'll get the Power Award. However, if a product offers a great level of performance or features for a very reasonable price, it'll get the Value Award. Simple, really.



THE GREAT VIDEOCARD ROUNDUP



PART TWO NVIDIA STRIKES BACK

Bennett Ring heads back into the labs to see what NVIDIA has to offer

This month sees the second half of our excitingly titled "The Great Videocard Roundup" (hey, our Ed doesn't always have the best days, ok?). Last month it was ATI's turn in the spotlight, so this month it's time for NVIDIA to flex its muscles.

Last month it was ATI's turn in the spotlight, so this month it's time for NVIDIA to flex its muscles

Driving us crazy

While the NVIDIA testing covered fewer cards than the ATI section, it took much longer. The reason for this is simple - poor drivers.

We find it hard to fathom why NVIDIA still hasn't released WHQL (Microsoft Windows Hardware Quality Labs) certified drivers for its 6800 series of video cards. These cards are on shelves, so there's no excuse for not having

the drivers ready. As a result of this we had to use a mish mash of drivers. When you're looking for accurate and repeatable benchmark results, you don't want a mish mash of anything. (Note - just before we sent this mag to the printers, drivers were finally

released to the public.)

After chatting to the graphics geniuses on the Beyond3D forums (www.beyond3d.com), we ended up using the NVIDIA 61.36 drivers for our 6800 cards. These were downloaded from the driver repository at Guru3d (www.guru3d.com). However, we preferred to use the WHQL certified 56.72 drivers where possible, and they worked ok with

most of the non-6800 cards. But every now and then one of our benchmarks would crash, and we'd need to use the 61.36 drivers to get it to run correctly. But the fun doesn't stop there.

We also found that the setting to disable Vsync (which can make a huge difference to benchmarking and game performance - disable it if you haven't already done so!) didn't always work, especially in our OpenGL Call of Duty test. It was easy to see when it hadn't worked properly, as the frame rate for every resolution was locked to 60fps. A quick reboot and some driver fiddling sorted the problem. We made sure that trilinear mipmaps were forced, and that the image quality was set to its highest possible setting. The exact same benchmarks used for the ATI cards were used again this month, making sure all settings for these were also identical. A quick refresher from last month's intro - look to the Call of Duty and UT2K4 benchmarks for performance with

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

THE FOLLOWING COMPONENTS WERE USED FOR TESTING BOTH ATI AND NVIDIA VIDEO CARDS.

- 3.4GHz Pentium 4
- ABIT IC7 motherboard
- 2 x 256MB Corsair DDR400
- Windows XP w/ Service Pack 1
- DirectX 9.0b
- Onboard sound enabled (Call of Duty needs sound to run)

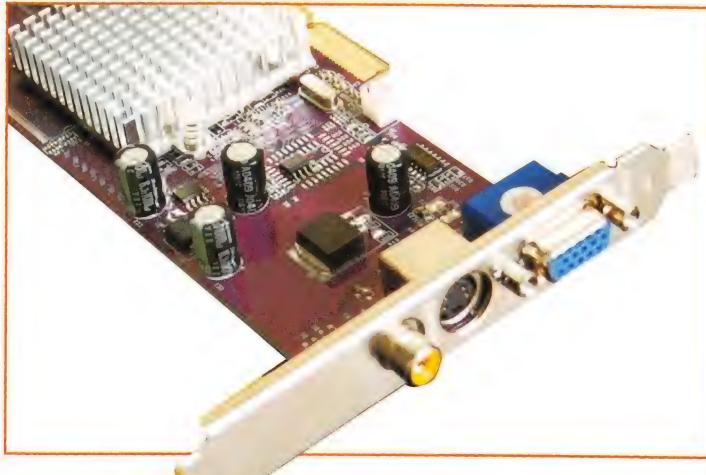
older games, while FarCry and Aquamark 3 are best for looking at framers in cutting edge games that are jam packed with shiny DirectX 9 features. Obviously the hardware platform (CPU, motherboard, etc) was also identical - check the boxout to see the various components involved in testing. You'll notice that we used a faster CPU than our standard testbench, as we wanted to make sure that the CPU was not the bottleneck in this system.

XpertVision GeForce MX440

• Price: \$74 • Supplier: Altech www.altech.com.au • Website: www.xpertvision.com.tw

Video cards don't get much cheaper than the MX440. They also don't get much slower. In fact, this proved to be the slowest video card in the entire roundup, for both ATI and NVIDIA. But if all you're doing with your PC is a bit of Net surfing or Word bashing, this is all you really need. The XpertVision version that we reviewed came with 64MB of memory, which is more than enough for this GPU limited card. An 8X AGP interface connects this card to your PC, while the 0.15 micron manufacturing process ensures that passive cooling is all that's necessary to keep this card humming along. The fact that the core is only running at 270MHz helps in this regard as well.

If you were foolish enough to try to game with this card, don't expect frame rates in the teens. It's also lacking any support for DirectX 8.1 pixel and vertex shaders. It's for this reason that we didn't include its FarCry results, as it wasn't rendering the game in the same way as the other cards, with a much lower level of image quality. We also omitted the antialiasing/anisotropic filtering results, as this card could not run at 4X AA with 8X AF.

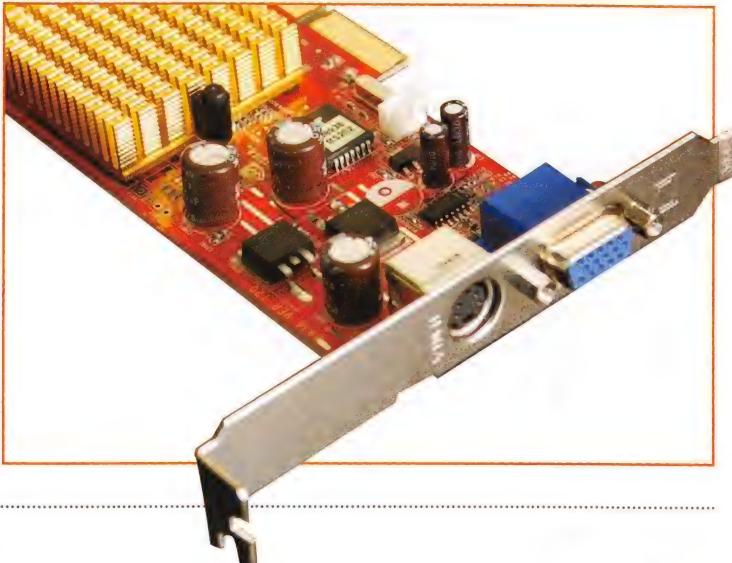


MSI GeForce MX4000

• Price: \$89 • Supplier: MSI www.msicomputer.com.au • Website: www.msicomputer.com.au

The MX4000 is still at the bottom of the pile, but it's a decent step up from the MX440. It's as small as the MX440, and also uses a passive cooling system, making it suitable for use in a silent media box. However, performance was much more usable, with framerates in both Call of Duty and UT2K4 that were actually playable. Well, almost. Unfortunately the lack of DirectX 8 support means that we couldn't use the FarCry or Aquamark 3 results. Besides, these were so slow that only masochists would want to use this card for either of these demanding game engines.

The version that we reviewed ships with 128MB of RAM, and has the S-Video and VGA outputs found on the MX440. However, it's lacking the composite out that is on the MX440 – a surprising omission considering this card is more expensive. Strangely, the card also wasn't able to complete the Call of Duty benchmark, but we're guessing this had something to do with drivers rather than faulty hardware.



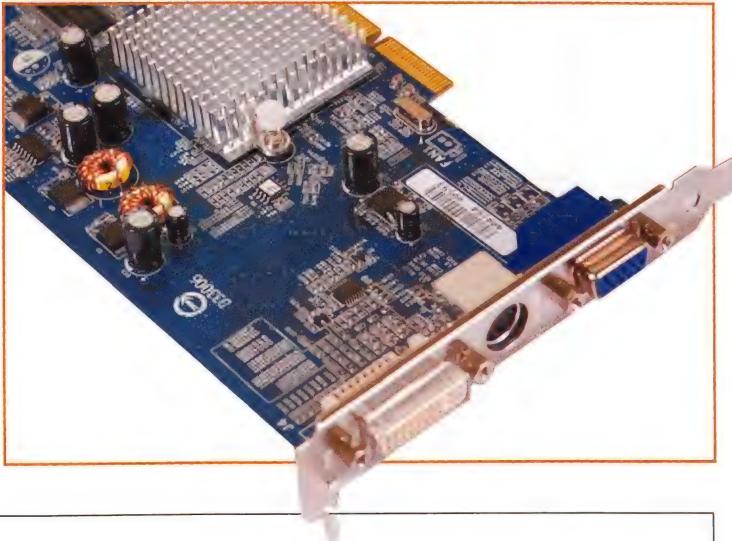
Gigabyte GeForce FX5200

• Price: \$109 • Supplier: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • Website: www.gigabyte.com.tw

Based around the NV34 chip, the 5200 is the first of the NVIDIA cards to break the \$100 barrier. Not by much though – this is still definitely a budget card. However, unlike the two previous cards, the 5200 supports pixel and vertex shaders. This meant we were able to successfully run both FarCry and Aquamark 3. However, just because it's got these features doesn't mean they run quickly. Take a quick gander at these benchmarks and you'll see that neither ran at a playable frame rate, even when they were limited to a resolution of 1024 x 768.

It was also the first of the budget cards to allow us to run with both 4X antialiasing and 8X anisotropic filtering. But just like the shader units, the ability to use these features didn't mean that you'd want to in real world circumstances, as performance takes a nose dive.

This card features 128MB of DDR memory, running at 166MHz (333MHz effective), while the core is clocked in at 250MHz. Due to the relatively simple and slow core, a passive heatsink is adequate for cooling.

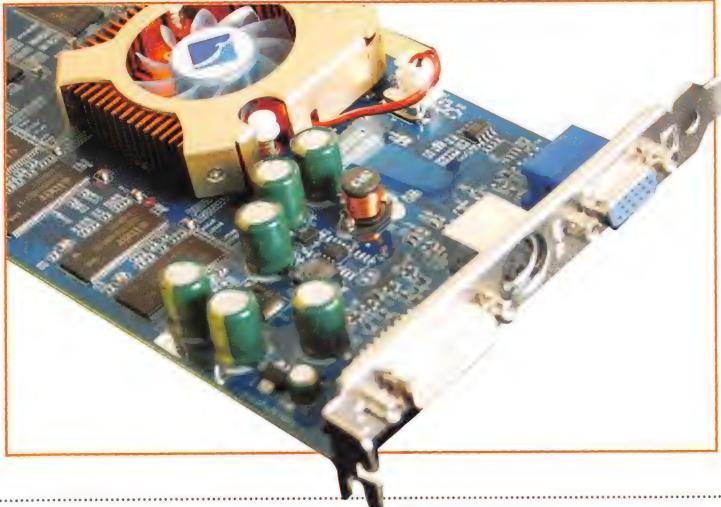


Albatron GeForce FX5500

• Price: \$190 • Supplier: AMI Computers www.ami-computers.com • Website: www.albatron.com.tw

If you read last month's part one of the roundup, you'll remember how much I harped on about the width of the memory bus. The wider it is, the better it is, and this also applies to a video card's memory bus. Often two video cards will be made using identical chipsets, such as the FX5500, but with different buses. This is the case with the Albatron GeForce FX5500. We reviewed the FX5500Q, which has a full 128-bit memory bus. This in contrast to the FX5500EP, which has a crippled 64-bit memory bus. Yet to look at the two cards you'd never know it - in fact this isn't even mentioned on the box. It was only when looking at the specifications of the cards on Albatron's website that we noticed this difference.

Even though this is still a very cheap card, its performance in older games is nothing to sneeze at, with both UT2K4 and Call of Duty returning frame rates that are very playable. However, this doesn't carry over into the newer game engines, with very poor performance in FarCry. Aquamark 3 refused to run, even with several new driver installs. But considering the low price of this card, it's easy to overlook the fact that it struggles with the newer games.

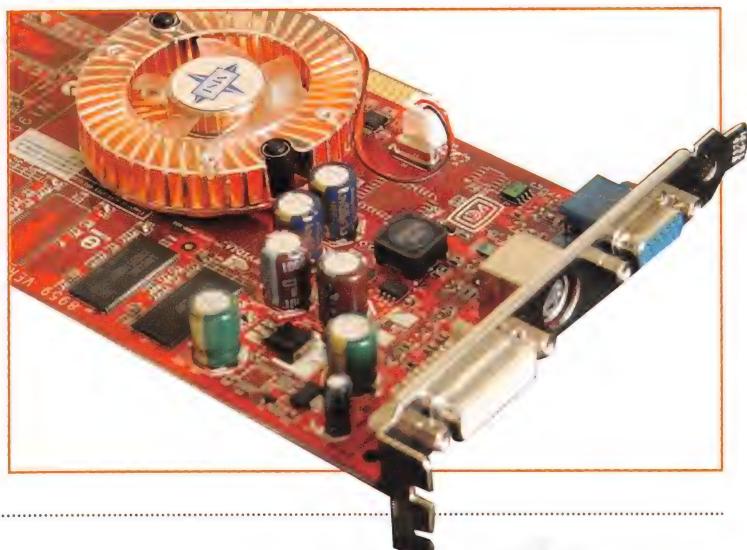


MSI GeForce FX5700LE

• Price: \$175 • Supplier: MSI www.msicomputer.com.au • Website: www.msicomputer.com.au

Based around the NV36 core, running at a speed of 250MHz, the 5700LE is the slightly slower cousin of the GeForce FX5700. As well as a slower core, it uses significantly slower memory, which runs synchronously with the core at 250MHz. On the version that we reviewed, the TD128, 128MB of DDR memory was present. S-Video, DVI and VGA out are included, as well as a small heatsink over the GPU.

This card performed slightly better than the GeForceFX5500, which makes it fine for older titles but next to useless for the latest generation. When compared to the ATI cards, this card is very close to ATI's 9200, with almost equal results throughout the benchmarks. One benefit it does have over the 9200 is the ability to run at both 4X AA and 8XAF - something the 9200 can't manage. But if you look at how slowly it performs under these circumstances, it's actually not a feature that you'd be likely to use. This leaves the two cards relatively well matched, but it appears that the ATI card has the edge in the pricing arena, coming in at around \$50 cheaper.



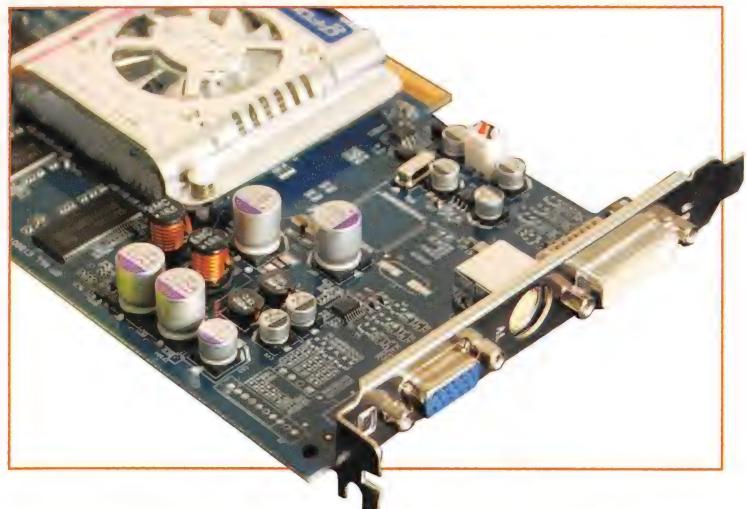
ABIT GeForce FX5700

• Price: \$220 • Supplier: Altech www.altech.com.au • Website: www.abit.com.tw

Wow, this card has a whopping 256MB of DDR ram. It must be blindingly fast, right? Tsk, tsk - if you fell for that one, you probably didn't read part one of our graphics card roundup, did you? Those of you who did will remember how we explained that the use of large amounts of memory on cards is more of a marketing tool than anything else. This is especially true with lower end cards such as the GeForce FX5700, where the card is bottlenecked by GPU performance and memory bandwidth more than anything else.

So ignore the fact that this card has such a large amount of memory - it's irrelevant. The 5700 differs from the 5700LE in the speed of the GPU, which runs at a significantly faster speed of 425MHz.

You'll see that in most of our benchmarks that this hasn't had a large impact on performance, with the 5700 only have a small lead over the 5700LE. However, in games where the GPU performance is the limiting factor, it makes a big difference - which is why Call of Duty received such a large performance increase.



Albatron GeForce FX5900XT

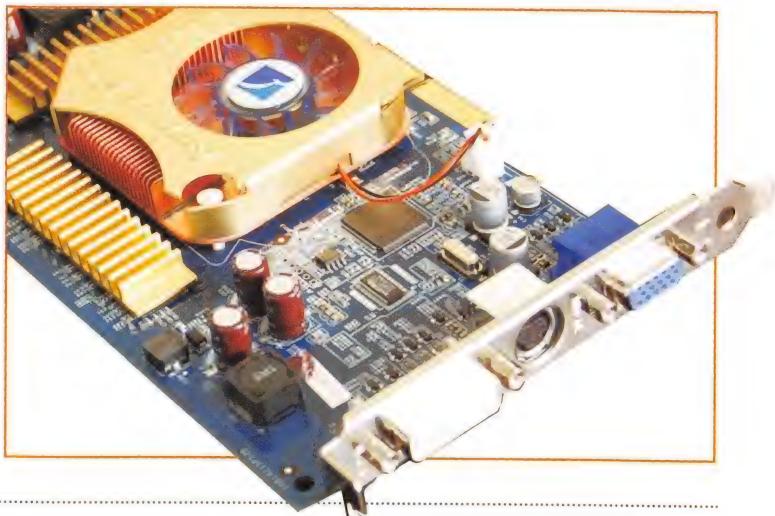
• Price: \$345 • Supplier: AMI Computers www.ami-computers.com • Website: www.albatron.com.tw

The 5900 is quite a leap in price between this card and the FX5700 – over \$100 in fact. So what does this extra cash give you in return?

Unlike ATI's use of the XT tag, which is used to signify the high end version, NVIDIA's use of these letters denotes the lower end card. So the 5900XT is actually a slower card than the 5900. Gotta love the way marketing people try to screw with our brains!

This card uses the same NV35 core which is used in the full blown 5900, and also has a full 256-bit memory bus. However, both the core and memory speeds have been reduced. The core now runs at 390MHz, while the memory is limited to 350MHz (700MHz effective). It's a much larger card than the cheaper GeForces, but is still a single slot solution.

This card displays a nice jump in performance over the 5700. In fact, it's the first NVIDIA card to offer playable frame rates in FarCry, but you'll still be limited to playing it at 1024 x 768.

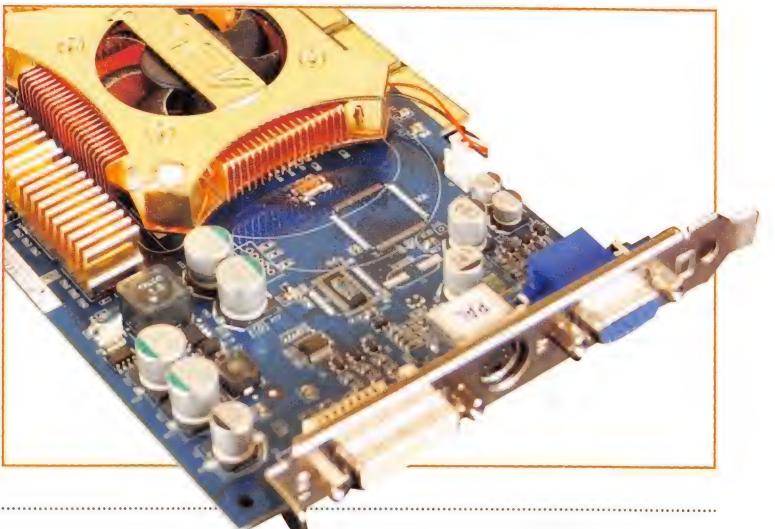


Asus GeForce FX5900

• Price: \$489 • Supplier: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • Website: www.asus.com.au

The 5900 is the big brother to the 5900XT. It's based around the exact same GPU, the NV35, but this chip runs at a slightly faster speed – 400MHz compared to the XT's 390MHz. As you can see this isn't much of a difference. However, the main thing that separates these two cards is the memory frequency. While the XT's DDR memory runs at 350MHz (700MHz effective), the 5900 has much faster memory, which runs at 425MHz (850MHz effective).

This higher speed memory gives the 5900 the edge at higher resolutions, but it's not considerably faster than the XT.



Leadtek GeForce 6800

• Price: \$629 • Supplier: Rectron www.rectron.com.au • Website: www.leadtek.com.tw

Who'd have thought you'd be able to buy one of these schtontkingly fast cards, so close to their release, for a mere \$600? Ok, \$600 shouldn't really ever be described as a "mere" amount, but it's still quite affordable. Based on NVIDIA's brand new NV40 GPU, the 6800 is the lowest priced of NVIDIA's three new high end cards, but it still packs enough punch to keep most gamers happy.

To sell the product at this price three major changes have been implemented. The core speed is lowered to 325MHz, while the memory speed is also lowered, this time to 350MHz (700MHz effective). The biggest architectural change is the disabling of 4 of the 16 pixel pipelines, leaving this card with 12.

The benchmarks tell an interesting story about what these changes have done to this card's performance. In some circumstances the 6800 performs just as well as its more expensive siblings. FarCry and UT2K4 at 1024 x 768 are two examples. But in other instances this card drops to around half the speed – as seen when FarCry is run at 1600 x 1200. Regardless, this card still offers excellent performance for those on a mid level budget.



MSI GeForce 6800GT

• Price: \$749 • Supplier: MSI www.msicomputer.com.au • Website: www.msicomputer.com.au

This card is being touted as the best value for money in the high end region of the video card sector. After giving it a thorough trashing in our benchmark suite, we have to agree. It's based on the same uber powerful NV40 core as the other two 6800s, but in this case it's running at a not too shabby 370MHz. The memory is also running faster, this time around at 500MHz (1GHz effective). Note that there is a total of 256MB of memory on these cards, and for once they're actually fast enough for this to make a difference. However, unlike the 6800, this card has all 16 pixel pipeline functioning, which can result in a large performance increase over the 6800 in certain instances.

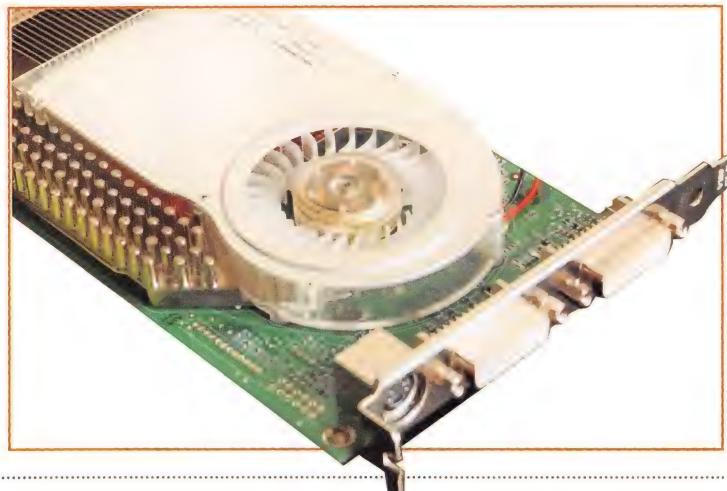
As the benchmarks show, this is a butt kicker of a card. Under all but the most taxing of circumstances this card stays neck and neck with the 6800 Ultra. It also shows the X800 Pro a thing or two, which is priced similarly. At the time of writing Doom 3 benchmarks had just been published online, showing that this card is faster than ATI's X800XT Platinum Edition in id's new shooter. We'll have a full performance test in next month's issue, but even without these results the 6800GT is a very attractive purchase.



ASUS GeForce 6800 Ultra

• Price: \$839 • Supplier: Synnex www.synnex.com.au • Website: www.asus.com.au

If you can find one of these in a retail store, let us know, as these things are still next to impossible to purchase. You might recall that we did a comparison between this card and the X800XT Platinum Edition a few issues ago, and the ATI card walked away the winner. However, it was a very close battle, and we suggested that NVIDIA might be able to extract more oomph out of its products given some driver tweaking. Well, it appears that this has happened, with NVIDIA closing the gap in most of the games that we test with. Unfortunately it still lags behind when anisotropic filtering and antialiasing is enabled - when you're paying this much for a video card, you definitely want to be able to use these two features. However, if you do manage to track one down, the 6800 Ultra is slightly cheaper than the X800XT. And next month you'll see just how well it performs in Doom 3...



Summary

Twenty six video cards later, and we can quite clearly announce that the company who makes the best video cards IS... neither. It's never that simple, silly. Both companies have products which are worthy of your dosh, but it all depends on just how much dosh you want to throw around.

If you're looking to buy at the snail end of the spectrum, perhaps for your granny's PC or for somebody you really don't like, both NVIDIA and ATI offer cards for less than \$100. And these are equally crap at running your games. For those with a spare hundred bucks, ATI's 9200 have a decent speed advantage over the NVIDIA 5200 cards.

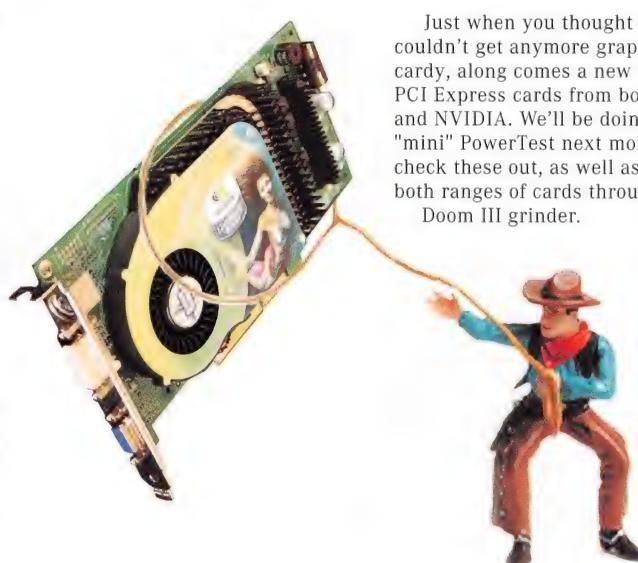
In the low to mid range category, which sell for around \$300, NVIDIA gets the thumbs up

for its 5900 cards, which well and truly leave ATI's 9600XT cards kicking and screaming in the dust. However, when ATI gets around to dropping the prices on its 9800 products the tables will turn, and we'll be pointing you in ATI's direction.

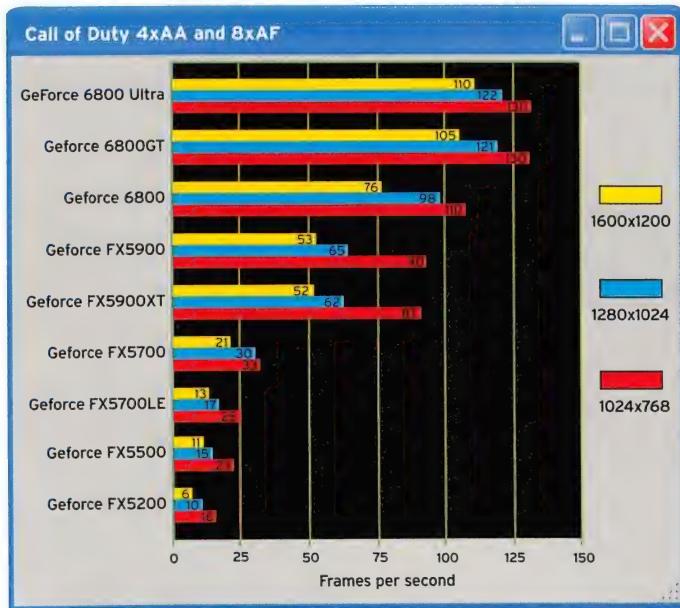
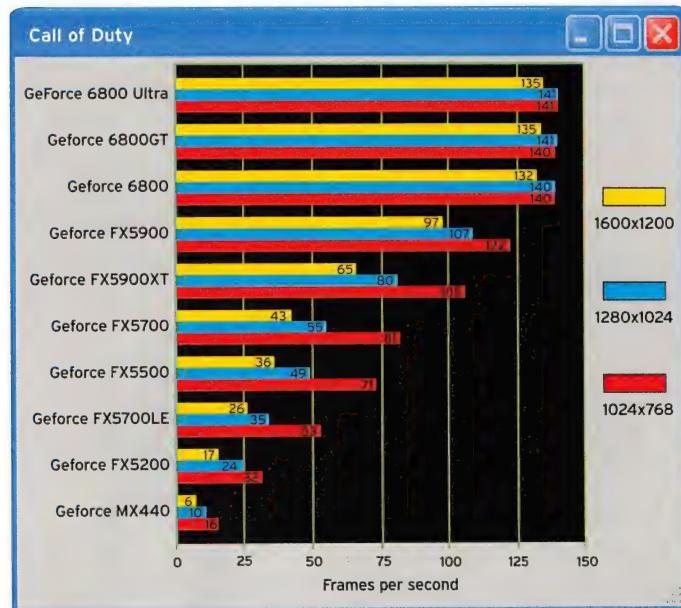
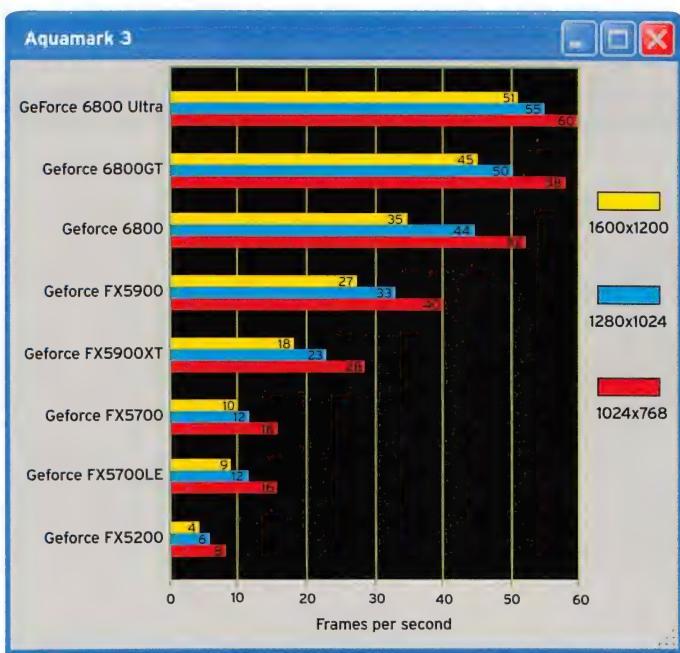
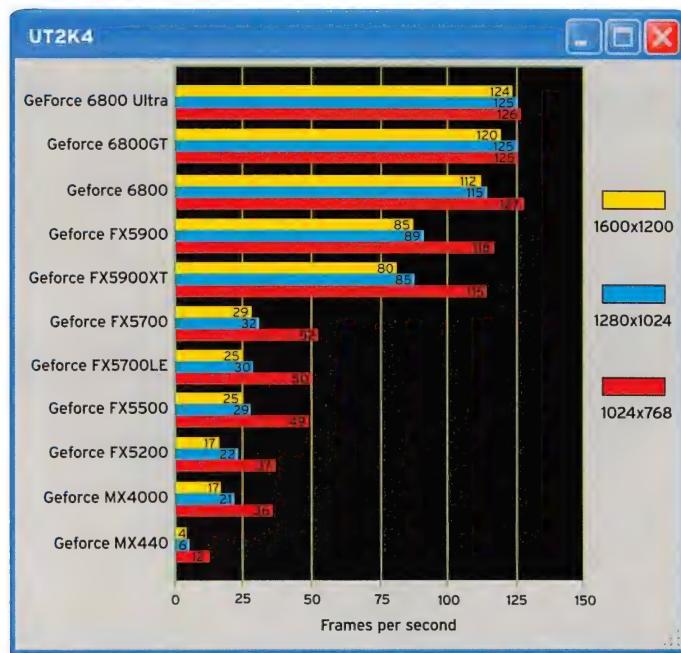
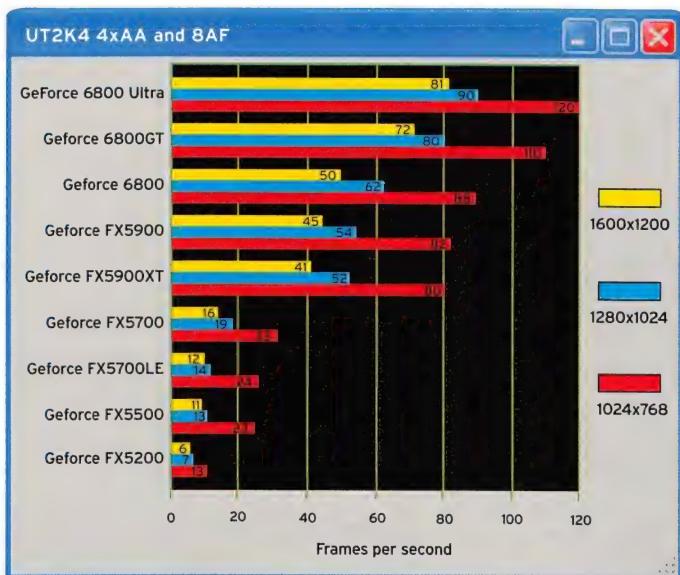
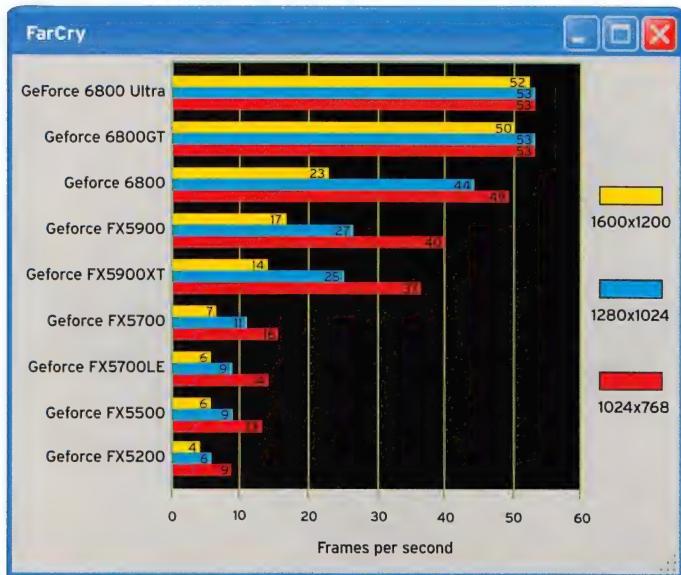
It's a big leap up to the next level of performance, where the X800 Pro goes head to head with the 6800GT. If you can find either of these cards, we'd recommend the 6800GT, as it consistently offers better value for money.

At the extreme high end of the spectrum, we still recommend the X800XT. Even though NVIDIA has made great progress with drivers for the 6800 Ultra, it appears that ATI's high end card is still retaining the lead.

Just when you thought things couldn't get anymore graphicy cardy, along comes a new range of PCI Express cards from both ATI and NVIDIA. We'll be doing a "mini" PowerTest next month to check these out, as well as putting both ranges of cards through the Doom III grinder.



Graphs



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AMD Athlon 64, Socket 939

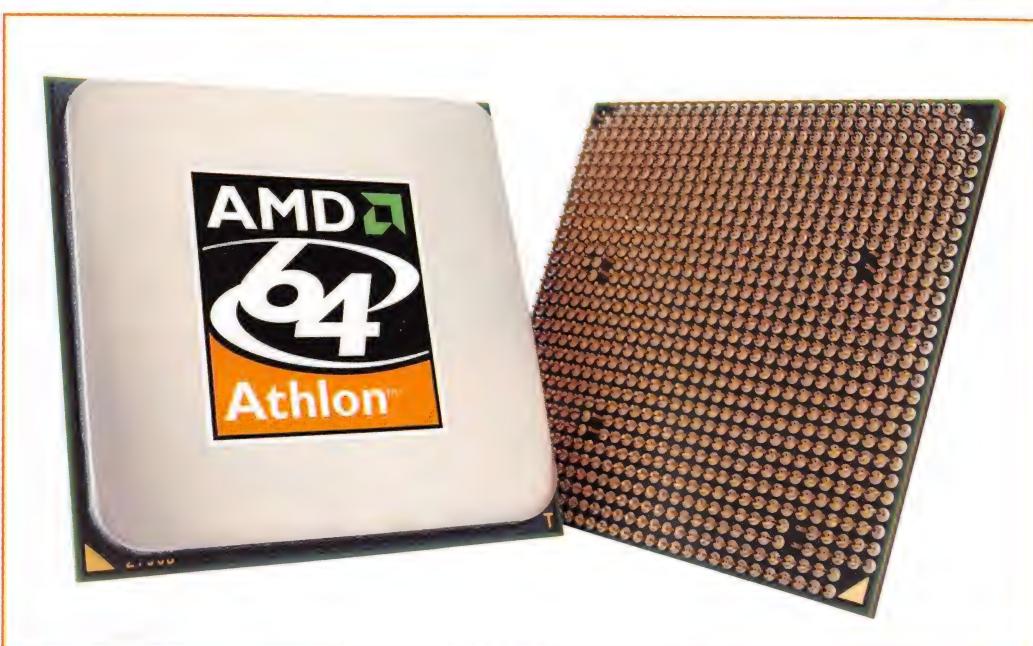
• Price: N/A • Distributor: N/A • URL: www.amd.com

It seems there's something in the news every second week about another failed mega corporation retrenching, sacking, or providing a 'voluntary career transition program' for their soon to be former employees. Our sympathies are usually with these outsiders, their families, and their future career prospects. But what about the guys and gals who miss the retrenchment boat? The ones left behind to soldier on in an environment where employers have cut staff and costs, and yet still expect the same workload to be managed as prior to the layoffs? Would you survive or thrive with only half your 'cache' of staff? Could you 'process' as much as you did with the old levels? Well that is the challenge ahead for a goodly portion of the AMD Socket 939 CPUs. Well the ones we got to play with anyway.

The corporate restructure

AMD have taken an unusual route with this new socket and it really needs to be explained. Let's start with what we, well, started with. Up till now, the Athlon 64s have been delivered via the Socket 940 and 754 implementations. The FX line, such as the FX-51, were sitting more at the dream end of the spectrum and were strapped into the 940 socket. The more run of the mill Athlon 64 models, such as the 3400+ chip, snapped into the 754 Socket.

And now we have the new Socket 939 and it's something of an attempt at consolidating these two platforms into one high-end desktop level package, and it's about time too. It would be great if I could just stop there, but alas, we still have some dead wood jamming things up. Simultaneous to the launch of this alleged saviour socket, AMD went and released a 3700+ CPU for the older Socket 754. Now that might seem like a silly idea but there are



These new standard Athlon 64 CPUs only have half the L2 cache than the older 3400+s, which is down to 512Kb

people out there, company men, who have been with us from the start, and their seniority has earned them a chance at redeployment. In the words of Shallow Hal, think of it as a severance pop.

Back to the 939 socket. Luckily for you we've got a new 3500+ and a 3800+ CPU built on the Newcastle core to monkey around with, so we'll review this new Socket design, while focusing on these two new entrants.

These new standard Athlon 64 CPUs only have half the L2 cache than the older 3400+s, which is down to 512Kb from the full Monty. That's going to raise an eyebrow or two but there's a couple of reasons why this isn't such a bad thing. Firstly because we're not talking department wide cache cuts, it's just the standard range of 64s that have been castrated. Secondly, because AMD are hoping to prove a point, and the point is that the savagery of cache cutting can be offset through modernisation. Case in point, the 3500+ CPU runs at exactly the same FSB speed and multiplier as the existing 3400+ CPU, which happens to have the full 1MB of L2 cache. So how is it possible that this eunuch can be labelled as a better performer?

Well, the AMD boffins have now included an integrated dual channel memory controller into the CPU. This provides a dramatic improvement by effectively doubling the bandwidth, and cutting

the latency down significantly. To assist with this, each motherboard BIOS will provide a special latency mode called '1T', and in theory, if you use this mode you should end up with performance levels better than a traditionally rigged CPU, even while suffering the crippled cache. We'll get to the benchmarks in a bit to check that, however the important fine print surrounding it is that not all memory configurations can handle the 1T mode. Some just can't accept change...

The good news is that you only need standard DDR for this new socket. No DDR2 and especially none of that more expensive registered DDR. As you may know, registered DDR actually hangs on to the data a little bit longer. It loiters around the water cooler for a while, chatting and criticising upper management before heading back to work and reading jokey emails. That would undo all the good work this new arrangement does.

To utilise the 1T mode you will need to limit yourself to only two slots with 100% identical chips in use, however you can use up to four RAM slots if you're happy to use the higher latency mode, but the performance loss is noticeable. Of course, you could throw the new similarly equipped Athlon 64 FX-53 (the Clawhammer variety, not the Sledgehammer core) in there and you'll get the best of both worlds, but that'd probably put you into receivership... from your better half!

IT'S ALWAYS THE QUIET ONES

Cool 'n' Quiet is the name AMD have given to their CPU heat management technology. Rather than wait for your CPU to reach the same temperature as a volatile board meeting, these new CPU's can auto-throttle down both their speed and their core voltage at any time, or perhaps all the time. We've seen this sort of thing on laptops and in Pentiums in the past (like SpeedStep), but they usually have a few slight inconveniences like slowing your games to a stuttering crawl, and giving your CPU fan lessons in pulsating hypnotic persuasion techniques. Not so here, you don't even notice it, and it's virtually invisible to benchmarks too!

So we've robbed Peter to pay Paul, but why bother for such a circumspect performance boost? Well the answer is financial. An effective restructure needs to cut costs, and in this case, it's in the manufacturing area. By changing out the cache, for the memory controller, the chip size is cut down by almost a third. That means you can stretch each silicon wafer a lot further. A pretty clever idea and it looks like it's worked for the most part. It'll be extremely interesting when they drop down to the 0.09 micron manufacturing process from the current 0.13 micron, to see if this technique holds. It should, and that means chips that are smaller, cooler, and more efficient on a whole new level.

Another feature that hardly rates a mention is the new 1000Mhz HyperTransport technology, which theoretically allows for a 25% bandwidth improvement over the current 800MHz bus. Unfortunately there's no consumer level chipset that can

KEEPING SICKNESS OUT OF THE OFFICE

You owe it to your workmates to stay at home, go to the beach, head to the movies or make some other sacrifice when you've got a bug. It's inhumane to share it around to your fellow workers (the ones you like anyway). These new AMD CPUs feature Enhanced Virus Protection (EVP) which is basically a hardware accelerated anti-virus agent. The CPU cordons off a small part of system memory and uses it as a vault, locking away any suspicious looking resident programs inside. It works hand in hand with specific software drivers and could be the sign of things to come. It's not yet fully supported by Windows, but it should be as soon as a certain Service Pack 2 release candidate hits the streets.

run this fast yet anyway. Alas, it only has just one of these HyperTransport links, so it's a step down from the 940-socket design. Translation: no multi-processor support in this socket. In theory, it could provide the same sort of performance increases that PCI Express could provide, and will eventually integrate with it, but at the moment it's merely a test bed that's yet to be stressed.

Same old same old

What's remarkable are the things that haven't changed with this release. Socket 939 CPU's aren't running any faster than the current 200MHz crowd. Both the 3500+, and the 3800+ models run with a frontside bus of 200MHz, with multipliers of 11 and 12 respectively, and there's no room in the Newcastle core for any further advancement. It's a case of too many chiefs and not enough Indians. And while it's possible that we could see a chip running at 2.6GHz, just to earn the coveted 4000+ namesake, it'll probably need to wait for the Winchester core. On a side note, Socket 939 isn't currently PCI express ready, but given it's an inevitable technology you can bet this'll be rectified in the near future.

Performance reviews

So how do these little chippies stack up? Well we've benched the 3500+ and the 3800+, and compared them against the current standard Athlon 64 3400+ so we can see just how the cache trade off works out. We've also included previous benchmarks for the 3.2 Pentium Extreme Edition, and Athlon FX51 CPUs to see where they fit in the bigger picture.

The identically clocked 3400 and 3500 show a bit of variation above and below from benchmark to benchmark, but they even out pretty well to class them as being at a similar level. There's also no clear winner between them and the Pentium Extreme chip, but it's in the budget that you'll see the real differences. The street price of the 3400+ is \$685, the new 3500+ is a hefty \$875, while the Pentium costs a whopping \$1500. A couple of things are evident here. Firstly, as we've previously established, it's difficult to justify an Intel solution at this level at the moment. More importantly though, the cost saving implied by the sacking of the L2 cache hasn't really been handed over to the consumer! You can draw your own conclusions there as to what AMD might be up to, but you won't be upgrading to this Socket 939 solution based on the economics.

The 3800+ doesn't quite scale up above the 3500+ as you'd predict, but it's still a capable performer, hovering around the Athlon FX-51's executive bathroom. With merely satisfactory results like that it's going to come down to dollars and your sixth cents. The 3800+ can be bought for around

\$1,200, which is about the same price as the FX-51. With performance around the same level, if perhaps slightly shy of it, it's going to come down to a few unknowns, like how long they are going to stick with Socket 939, and when they'll get PCI Express.

What pleased us most about the performance of these new CPUs were their operating temperatures. I know I speak for many gamers when I say that I'm sick of chips that need portable hurricanes just to keep them merely hot! Both CPUs idled at a nice 33 degrees, and only hit between 46 and 49 under gaming load. And that's with a fairly stock cooler running on the quiet setting. Presshot has something to learn from these chips.

Overclocking

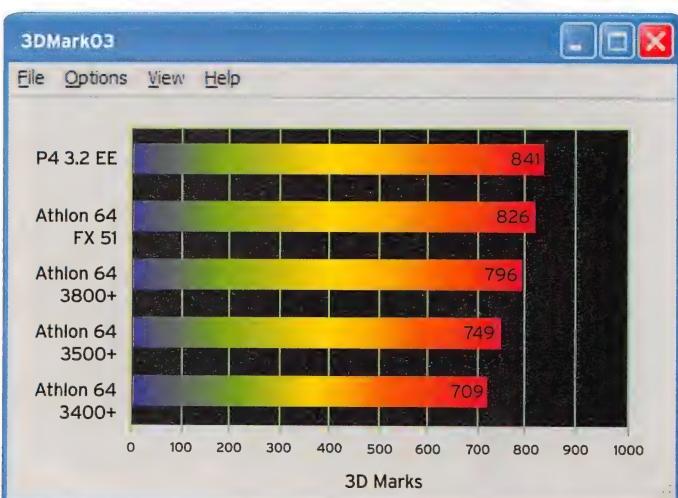
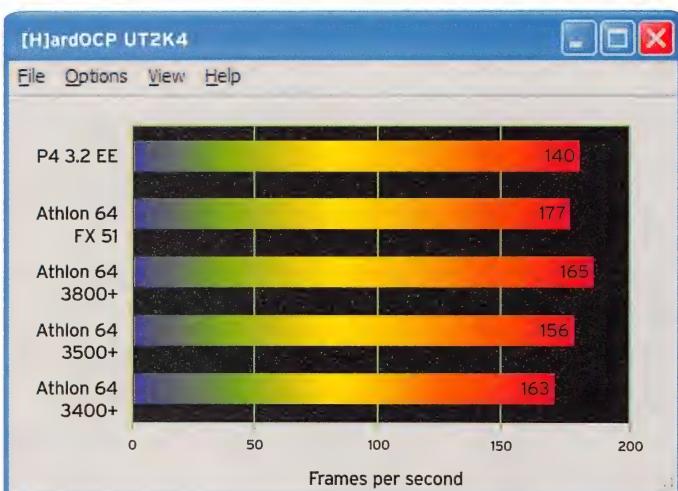
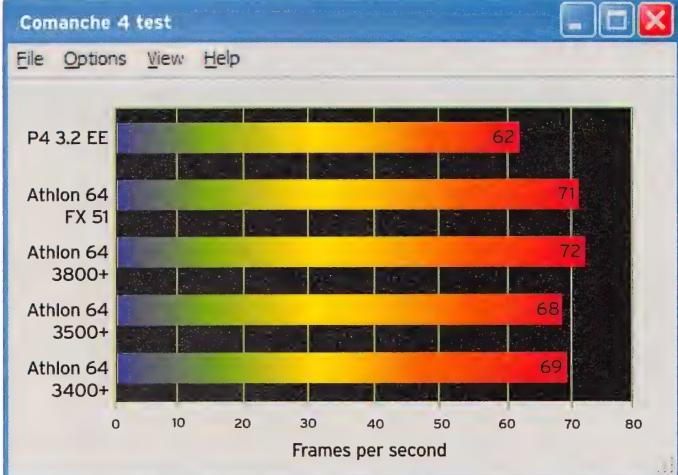
For gamers, this can make or break the deal. Unfortunately, it's inconclusive at this point. The two chips we had to play with were both multiplier locked, and were pretty feeble overclockers. The 3500+ only scraped its way up the FSB scale by a mere 16 MHz, providing just under a 200MHz overall improvement. The 3800+ fared slightly better, but still with a bland 264MHz total gain. Nothing to write home about, but it does put the 3800+ into the 4000+ club, perhaps not by frequency, but indeed by most people's measure. What is promising is that the FX-53 supposedly has an unlocked multiplier and is being billed as the gamers' or enthusiasts' chip. So when that pops up, it should provide some exciting results!

The future?

What we've seen here is consolidation. AMD have refocussed the desktop market back onto a primary design, the Socket 939. This socket should see AMD through the next couple of years, though it could see a few revisions in that time. It's set to handle the next run of FX cores (Toledo), and the new Winchesters, which we'll see in a couple of months. They haven't gone the whole hog and merged the budget XP range into the fold, which will continue via the Socket 754 line, but it's something. I suspect that AMD might pick up a few extra quid out of this deal by keeping the savings to themselves, but with no Intel offerings within cooee of their performance levels, can you blame them?

If you're looking to enter the Athlon 64 market right now, the Socket 939 is the viable entry point and while the CPUs we've looked at are not breath-taking in themselves, they hint at greatness. But then again, if you're not too eager, I'd advise waiting to see if the FX-53 Clawhammer is significantly better before you plonk down your deposit on any of the these CPUs.

Jason Brown



Hercules DJ Console

• Price: \$499 • Distributor: Tech Pacific • URL: <http://us.hercules.com/>

If you've always wanted to give DJing a try, but have been put off by the prohibitive price of professional equipment, then the Hercules DJ Console is for you. This is a great entry level product, and will help you take full advantage of all that (legitimate) digital music currently eating up HDD space.

The Console plugs into your PC or laptop via USB and comes with its own onboard sound card, and all the basic functionality of two decks and a mixer integrated into the one unit. As you'd expect, you plug your headphones into the front of the unit and cue the next track over them before bringing it out into the real world. Just like DJing. There are two jog dials for cueing tracks, faders for both channels, a cross fader, knobs for bass, mid and treble, three assignable FX/cue point buttons and so on. The reality is, however, that most of the interaction takes place on your monitor - making the experience less tactile than you might expect.

The DJ Console comes with a suite of programs for your mixing delectation, but none of them are really ideal. The reason for this is that they're all just existing PC programs that have been adapted for use with the system, rather than being built from the ground up specifically for the task. We found that Virtual DJ was probably the best, as it has the most practical interface and "vision" of what you're doing. Simply drag and drop tracks onto the turntables on screen and away you go.

One of Virtual DJ's best features is that it displays the wave files for both of the tracks you're playing,

giving you a good visual indication of where the beats/peaks are and whether your tracks are in phase. This also lets you see where tracks break down and change, so you can plan what you're going to do with a mix well in advance.

Virtual DJ also has a Beat Lock function, which not only sets both channels to the same BPM but aligns both on the nearest beat and constantly monitors the tracks ensuring that they're still in time. Unfortunately this leads to semi-regular wavering of the music, which sounds both messy and unprofessional. That said, it's still a very useful tool and in terms of picking the BPM is usually on the money (although it had a lot of difficulty with garage). The ideal way to use the Beat Lock is to quickly enable then disable it so that both channels are at the same BPM, then align and maintain the tracks manually. Although this takes a lot of the skill out of beat mixing, the reality is that the DJ Console isn't hardcore hardware - it's basically an advanced toy, so you might as well make it easy on yourself and focus on what you're actually doing with the music.

Besides, it's still great fun using the jog dials to speed up or slow down a track to sync it in.

That's about all the jog dials are good for, however. Don't expect to be able to scratch (although the DJ Console does come with scratch software) and don't even dream of throwing into a track on the One, cos it won't happen. This ain't a CDJ-1000. Accept the DJ Console's limitations and you'll have heaps of fun with its strengths.

Mixing isn't just about rocking a party - it's also about having the freedom to create new soundscapes and reinvent your music



After all, mixing isn't just about rocking a party - it's also about having the freedom to create new soundscapes and reinvent your music, and the DJ Console lets you do this. Using the hardware, you can add effects, tweak the EQ to bring out certain elements in your tracks (such as just mixing the bass from one channel in with the mid and treble on the other), quickly cut between the tracks using the cross fader and so on. Using Virtual DJ brings other things to the table like deliberately mixing tracks on the half beat (which is really easy to do using the wave display), looping tracks by anything from a couple of bars right down to a quarter of a beat, and much more. If you've got a good collection of music with a 4/4 beat you'll have hours and hours of entertainment with this piece of kit.

There are a few caveats, however. The first I've already mentioned - the music tends to waver a bit if you use the Beat Lock. Combine this with average overall sound quality and you know this isn't something you can use to play at your local club. Keep it at home baby. The feel definitely isn't one of professional equipment either. The DJ Console feels

decidedly plastic, which doesn't really effect its performance, although we would have liked more weight behind the cross fader. The cross fader is also a little too close to the jog dials, meaning it's easy to bump tracks out of alignment. We also encountered an annoying bug with the software, whereby the keyboard would drop out whenever I booted my machine and let the DJ Console app run in the background. Hopefully there'll be a patch by the time you read this but it was very annoying to say the least. Still, it's about time a piece of hardware like this came along. Good value for money.

Cam Shea



SPECIFICATIONS

- 16-bit/48KHz sampling, 24-bit ADC/DAC
- 5.1-channel analog output
- High-quality connectors
- Digital optical/coaxial In/Out
- MIDI In/Out
- 5.1-channel output via minijack (3.5mm) or RCA plugs
- Stereo Line Input (2 RCA plugs)
- 1/4 inch (6.35mm) stereo microphone Input
- 1/4 inch (6.35mm) stereo headphone Output

PCPP Score

A great entry level tool for budding DJs.

85



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Silent Cat 9CM					
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DVD Burner Shootout

DVD burners are getting cheaper, faster and more feature-packed. Which is great news for hardcore computer users like you. **James Bannan** takes a look at two of the latest units on the market.

Aopen 8x8 Dual APP

• Price: \$169 • Distributor: BlueChip IT www.bluechipit.com.au • URL: asia.aopen.com.tw

This is latest in the range of 8-speed DVD combo drives. The list of supported features is quite standard for these new models – everything from CD-ROM to DVD-RAM. It reads as a 40x CD-ROM, but the Sandra2004SP2 benchmark we ran suggests that it can read at speeds more like 50x (over 3200KB/sec), which is a nice perk. DVD reading is faster again, indexing at 5MB/sec. As with most DVD burners, it's not a high-speed CD writer, maxing out at 24x R/RW, but that's still good enough to burn a 700MB CD in under five minutes. DVD burning was nice and quick, dropping 4.5GB of data onto a blank in around eight minutes.

To keep things running smoothly and error-free, this unit has a 2MB data buffer and

supports Powerburn buffer underrun technology (as you'd hope it would). It can also drop the burning speed if necessary to prevent coaster creation. This is more likely to be necessary if the drive is mounted vertically. It can be mounted vertically, but why take the risk?

The Aopen comes bundled with VideoStudio 7 and neoDVD for video authoring, PowerDVD 5 for playback, and Nero Burning ROM 5 / InCD for burning. The inclusion of Nero 5 is a bit disappointing, as Nero 6 has been out for a while now, and is much better at DVD burning.

So, not that much to sing about with this unit. It's fast, cheap and stable, but doesn't break any new ground. If all you're after is a decent DVD burner, here 'tis.



70

Sony DRU-700A

• Price: \$349 • Distributor: Sony Style Australia www.sonystyle.com.au • URL: www.sony.com.au

Ah, Sony Style. This unit has a transparent, mirror-finish faceplate, and it ships with a replacement black faceplate just in case... who cares how it performs? After all, it's a Sony (don't you just love effective brand advertising?).

OK, that's not really enough reason to fork out \$349, so here's a few more. Firstly, this drive is a faster CD burner. It can go at 40x, which is good enough to burn a full CD in under three minutes. Nice, but it's still limited to 24x CD-RW. And at 8x, it burns a full DVD in eight minutes. Similar to the Aopen, the CD/DVD read tests benchmark higher than the expected rates, which is always cool. It also has the standard 2MB buffer cache and supports Powerburn.

One nice, understated feature is that this drive boasts a shorter length profile – it's about an inch shorter than the Aopen, which is good news when internal space in

your box is at a premium.

But enough with the pleasantries already. The big asset of the DRU-700A is that it supports the new dual-layer DVD media standard. Dual-layer DVDs can take up to 8.5GB of data per disk... very nice for humungous data backups. The burn is created as a multisession burn – one session for the first 4.5GB, second session for the rest. This means that at least some of the data is accessible from DVD drives which can't read dual-layer DVDs. Burning dual-layer is a slow process, however. The default speed is 2.4x, so you're looking at around an hour for the full 8.5GB.

The software bundle with the Sony is much better than the Aopen. It ships with the full Nero 6 suite – Start Smart, Burning ROM, Express, InCD, ShowTime and NeroVision Express. Very nice. You'll be up and running instantly with that bundle.



85

OUR OPINION IS...

Well, these units are a bit different, and in these circumstances a direct comparison can sometimes be unfair. However, that's never stopped us before, so there's no hesitation in stating that the Sony is the best of the two. The Aopen is yet another unexciting, beige burner. It does its job with no style or flair, but it's reliable and cheap. The Sony has the advantage of faster CD-R and dual-layer support, and it's more compact and looks sexy into the bargain. It's more expensive, but you really do get what you pay for with this unit.

Toys for the Boys from MicroGram

HOT PRICE

USB Net Phone

This USB net phone allows users to make free calls with programs such as Skype (www.skype.com) when connected to the internet.
Cat 10129-1 \$89

LCD Monitor Arm

This monitor arm supports 14" 15" & 17" monitors with standard VESA mounts. A 3 in 1 mounting system allows for desktop, wall or clamp mounting.
Cat 4666-16 \$99



Multi-homed ADSL Router

Enhance reliability & double your ADSL capacity by using two different ISPs.
Cat 10145-1 \$399



USB Digital TV Tuner

Watch and capture (mpeg-2) digital TV broadcasts on your PC or Notebook.
Cat 3547-1 \$319



Bluetooth GPS

Turn a Bluetooth capable PDA, Laptop, or Smartphone into a GPS.
Cat 11433-1 \$469



12v Mini PC

This Mini PC is perfect for the Car, Boat or even the office.
Cat 1150-16 \$729



LCD Monitor Arm

This monitor arm supports 14" 15" & 17" monitors with standard VESA mounts. A 3 in 1 mounting system allows for desktop, wall or clamp mounting.
Cat 4666-16 \$99



USB to 2 Serial Ports

Provides two native windows COM ports that are compatible with Windows serial communication applications.
Cat 2852-16 \$119



Gigabit PCI Adapter

Add a high speed gigabit port to your PC with this inexpensive 1000/100/10Mbps NIC.
Cat 11359-1 \$41

HOT PRICE



USB Extender

Use a USB device up to 50m away from a PC over inexpensive UTP cable (not included).
Cat 11666-1 \$105



8 Port SATA RAID

Allows eight SATA drives to be connected in a RAID array. Compatible with 32 and 64 bit PCI slots.
Cat 2905-1 \$649



DVI KVM Switch

A two way KVM switch for use with a DVI monitor and PS/2 mouse and keyboard.
Cat 11663-1 \$169



SATA Controller

Attach SATA Hard Disks to your PC with this easy to install PCI SATA Controller card. Comes with two internal connectors.
Cat 2872-16 \$99



Video to VGA

Display any video signal on a VGA monitor. Has S-Video and RCA inputs.
Cat 3479-1 \$259



NEW!

USB to 5.1 Sound

If you need 5.1 Channel Audio on your Desktop or Laptop, this USB2.0 adapter is the perfect solution for it. The Adapter has a S/PDIF and a 3.5mm headphone output.
Cat 23025-16 \$99

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PC Case Comparison

What good is a beast of a machine without the right case to put it in? Your baby needs a home, after all. For this issue James Bannan took a look at two such units, guaranteed to make your mouth drool.

Nzxt Guardian

• Price: \$132 (no PSU) \$176 (with PSU) • Distributor: AusPC Market www.auspcmarket.com.au • URL: www.nzxt.com

This isn't just a PC case, it's "crafted gaming armour". In other words, it's mostly about eye candy. The front of the case is covered by some moulding that looks like a Transformer – remember them? You half expect this unit to turn into a robot, punch you in the mouth and exit through the wall. Although if you could turn it against your LAN enemies, dicing them up into small lumps of quivering meat, that'd be cool!

If you can get past the freaky faceplate (with glimmering blue LCD lights, just perfect for those late-night hallucinations), the internals are quite nice. There's plenty of space for peripherals, with five 5.25" bays, two 3.5" FDD bays and three 3.5" HDD bays. The default power supply is a 420W, so you should be able to fill the case and still have it humming along quite happily.

Heat dissipation is pretty good. In addition to the power supply fan,

there are two back-mounted case fans, and one side-mounted fan. Incidentally, the left side is see-through with more funky "gaming armour" moulding. So you can see your cards spinning away and feel, like, totally righteous dude.

One very nice feature of the Guardian is its "screwless" approach to peripherals. The PCI/AGP slots and all the internal bays have plastic mounting locks, which are easy to remove and replace. The only component needing screws is the motherboard. This is perfect for quick and painless hardware tinkering.

Back to the faceplate again. It covers all the bays, including the power and reset switches, so you have to open it up to access these. There are also two slide tabs at the bottom on either side which open up to reveal two USB ports (left side) and the headphone/microphone jacks (right side). Nice touch.



69

Lian Li PC-V1000

• Price: \$399 • Distributor: Anywhere Computers www.anywhere.com.au • URL: www.lian-li.com

Now this is a sweet piece of engineering. Where to start? Well firstly, it's totally aluminium, and both the front and back plates are riddled with holes, making it look slightly like futuristic cybernetic swiss cheese.

The motherboard mounts on the left-hand case wall rather than the right, so the access is completely different. This puts the PCI slots at the top, integrated jacks in the middle as normal, and then the power supply at the bottom. This is pretty cool. No drag on the power cable, and much easier access to the cards.

The internal area has been subdivided into separate compartments, top and bottom. The top area contains the motherboard, cards, 5.25" bays and FDD bay. This area is cooled by one big-assed mother of a fan mounted at the back. The lower area is split up into three areas – one for the power supply, and two bays with three 3.5" bays in each (that's six bays, in case you were wondering). This area is cooled by a smaller front-mounted fan. There are convenient holes cut in the internal moulding to allow cabling through, and the edges are plastic-coated to prevent the metal from biting in and damaging cables.

Unlike the Guardian, the V-1000 does use screws for its peripheral mounting. Not that this is a bad thing, but the sheer amount of metal in this case means a greater risk of a skinned knuckle – especially with the side panels, which actually have a scalloped edge to them. That's just asking for blood. On the plus side, it's sturdy enough for you to sit on and have your friends push you down a slope.

One nice further feature is that it's wheel-mounted and has brakes. A bit odd for a desktop installation, but great for an under-the-desk situation. Also, it lifts the case off the ground (duh!), allowing for airflow from the 3.5" bays in the lower compartment. The only reason not to get this case is the high price – at \$400 without a PSU it's not a budget model. But everybody knows that good looks don't come for free.



90

OUR OPINION

While the hardcore/tacky gamer might be swayed by the Guardian's funky moulding and ease of use, the V-1000 really has much more to offer, and none of its features are gimmicks. It will keep the internals nice and cool, allowing your machine to hum along at peak performance. BUT (isn't there always one?), the V-1000 is more than twice the price of the Guardian. Lian Li cases are always a bit on the pricy side, and although you get what you pay for, some people might find the \$400 price tag too prohibitive.

Samsung LS32A23W 32" LCD TV

• Price: \$6999 • Distributor: Samsung www.samsung.com.au • URL: www.samsung.com

When the first crop of LCD screens bigger than 68cm hit the market, they were little more than dumb panels, consisting of a bunch of inputs and a power switch. These days, a big LCD panel is a powerhouse of AV entertainment, containing everything from digital receivers to Dolby decoders.

Samsung's snappily named LS32A23W gives you a pleasing 76cm of that famous screen real estate, and support for HDTV. Plug your PC into the thoughtfully included DVI port and you'll enjoy gaming at 1280x768, the same resolution as Samsung's 17" widescreen LCD monitor.

Unlike some units, the LS32A23W doesn't come with a digital receiver, so you'll need a set top box to make the most of the unit's image quality capabilities. Truly, this is not a screen you want to use to watch analogue TV.

Samsung makes a big deal of its Digital Natural Image Engine,

SPECIFICATIONS

- 32"/76cm diagonal
- 16:9 and 4:3 auto-switch mode
- HDTV capable (1080i, 720p)
- Digital Natural Image Engine
- DVI input
- 5.1 Dolby Digital Decoder
- 600:1 contrast ratio
- Dimensions (mm): 801x87x597
- Weight: 22kg

which claims to "optimise" any signal passed to the TV by "identifying the type of signal" and then "processing noise" to enhance contrast, detail, colour and eliminate "noise" in areas of strong motion.

The LS32A23W's biggest competition is, naturally, home cinema projectors which are usually somewhat cheaper and considerably more flexible. Not to mention the fact that they project an image a hell of a lot bigger than this TV. Counteracting this, the unit does have really exceptional image quality.



It's crisp and vibrant even in a bright room and the pixel response time, while not documented, must be at most 25ms which is tolerable for most games.

It's also a very complete package. You can plug your modular home cinema system into it, add a couple of consoles and your PC and still have a port left over for your video camera. Or you can just use it straight out of the box as a normal TV.

A final word on price: at \$7K this is no idle investment. And you need to ask yourself, are 76 centimetres of really amazing image quality really enough for this outlay? LCDs have been around for a while now, but if you go out and grab a unit like this, you should still consider yourself an early adopter, with all the usual caveats that apply.

Anthony Fordham

PCPP Score

The painful price doesn't take the shine off this very complete system

81

Xclef HD-800

• Price: \$499 • Distributor: mStation www.mstation.com.au • URL: Xclef www.xclef.com.au

Make no mistake, the iPod is an excellent MP3 player. It holds a stack of tunes, plays them with brilliant sound quality, and looks dead sexy. Thanks to a massive marketing campaign it's also officially "cool", helping you to pick up members of the opposite sex who are shallow enough to select a life partner based on what kind of digital music player they use. But the iPod is due for a knee-grazing, tooth-chipping fall. It's always the way with revolutionary products. They rise to the top, stagnate for a while, before a competing product topples it from the number one spot. The Xclef HD-800 aims to be the MP3 player to stick it to the iPod, but can it hope to come close to the simple beauty of Apple's cash cow?

When the Xclef was first released it had a large price advantage over the 20GB iPod, but they're now both selling at an identical cost. \$499 to be precise, which is very impressive

considering how much music you can squeeze into 20GB. It also supports Ogg Vorbis and WMA files, two formats that the iPod can't handle. Finally, an FM radio separates the HD-800 from the iPod, but it needs a strong signal to operate without static.

When it comes to transferring files to your MP3 player, the Xclef also has the edge, as it doesn't require any software installation for this to take place. This makes it infinitely more convenient to use as a mobile hard drive.

Sound quality is right up there with that of the iPod - it's great. However, the interface does seem a little clunky compared to Apple's contender. Battery life is slightly better, at 16 hours, which is four hours more than the iPod.

SPECIFICATIONS

- 20GB storage
- 16 hour battery life
- Voice recorder
- FM radio
- USB 2.0



It's also a fraction heavier and larger than the iPod.

There's one area where the Xclef can't match the iPod - aesthetics. This isn't surprising considering how many wacky designers work at Apple, but it's something that many people value. But if looks don't

matter to you, the ability to play Ogg and WMA files, as well as hook this player up to your PC without installing software, makes this player worthy of your consideration.

Bennett Ring

PCPP Score

A very nice HD based player, with more features but less style than the iPod

90

Bennett Ring

PowerTools

While it would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if we could review hardware based on the shininess of the packaging it arrives in, we're pretty sure our beloved readers are a little more interested in how the hardware actually performs. Which is why we have the PC PowerPlay PowerTools - batteries not included.

If you're anything like us, you probably don't give a rat's arse if Word will open three seconds faster on the new Pentium 64,

or if you can compress a zip file more speedily using DDR6-8000 memory. Nope, this is PowerPlay, so it's all about how well your games will perform.

Our PowerTools are broken into two categories, videocard tests and CPU/motherboard/memory tests, and you'll notice that most of these are based on real world game engines. We spoke to Intel, AMD, NVIDIA and ATI about which games to use to benchmark our hardware, and

after tossing out their biased recommendations settled on the following applications for the majority of our tests. Actually, we used the benchmarks that competing companies both agreed upon, to help make sure our tests can't be accused of favouring one flavour of hardware over another.

Of course, every now and then a unique piece of hardware will arrive that can't be tested properly using these

applications, and in these circumstances we'll use the most appropriate benchmarking software.

We also use test benches (a fancy way of saying a PC outside of a case, waiting to electrocute unsuspecting hardware noobs), standardised hardware platforms that ensure our benchmark results can be compared to each other month after month. Check out the box below to see what components we use in our test benches.

CPU Tests

3D Mark03 CPU test

Nobody can deny that this CPU test is a nice way to give processors a thorough workout. And hey, it's easy to use and free - 'nuff said.

Jedi Knight 2

We couldn't ignore a benchmark that includes lightsabres. We run this test at low resolution (640x480), with texture details lowered, and geometry details maxed out.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test 2.1

We run the CPU test of this benchmark at low resolution, and it's one of the finest indicators of CPU performance available.

Comanche 4

It sucked as a game, but as a CPU/motherboard/memory benchmark this is a beauty. We run at 640x480 resolution to make sure it's the CPU that's carrying the load.

Videocard tests

Aquamar3

Aquanox isn't the most popular game, but the engine behind it

makes for a great benchmarking application. We crank all the settings to the highest.

Call of Duty

OpenGL is on the verge of extinction, but there's one very important game that still uses it. Call of Duty is the premiere WWII themed shooter, and drags the Q3 engine into the 21st century with the use of pretty pixel shaders. All image quality settings are maxed.

FarCry

This is a game that illustrates just how advanced PC graphics have become. With more DirectX 9 effects than a Microsoft graphics lab, it's also one of the more intensive games around. Which makes it a great benchmark! We test with all image quality settings maxed.

UT2K4

Considering the engine is a couple of years old, UT2K4's engine still looks mighty fine. It's not quite as demanding as FarCry, but it'll still give your GPU a bit of a lashing. As well as running this with all image quality settings maxed, it's also the game we use to test antialiasing and anisotropic filtering performance.

TEST BENCHES

Intel Test Bench (x2)

Intel Pentium 4 2.6G

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO
www.akatech.com.au

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL
DDR400
www.altech.com.au

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB
ATA100 Hard Drive
www.seanale.com

ABIT IS7 865PE motherboard
www.altech.com.au

TOPOWER 470W PSU
www.auspcmarket.com.au

Mitsubishi Diamond View
2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com.au

Microsoft multimedia keyboard
and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au

Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

AMD Test Bench (x1)

AMD Athlon XP 2600+

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO
www.akatech.com.au

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL
DDR400
www.altech.com.au

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB
ATA100 Hard Drive
www.seanale.com

ABIT NF7-S
www.altech.com.au

TOPOWER 470W PSU
www.auspcmarket.com.au

Mitsubishi Mitsubishi Diamond
View 2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com

Microsoft multimedia keyboard
and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au

Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

Image Quality testing:

We also use a Sony G520 21" CRT monitor for the image quality testing of video cards.



www.akatech.com.au



www.corsairmicro.com



www.auspcmarket.com.au



www.intel.com



www.abit.com.tw



www.amd.com



www.seagate.com



www.hightech.com.hk



www.altech.com.au



www.sony.com.au



www.mitsubishi-electric.com.au

James Bannan

Decrypt

Like any XP theme, Windows' user-friendliness is only "skin-deep". It still has the capacity to baffle anyone with complicated techno-babble, so this month DeCrypt takes a big breath and plunges into the gospel according to Bill.

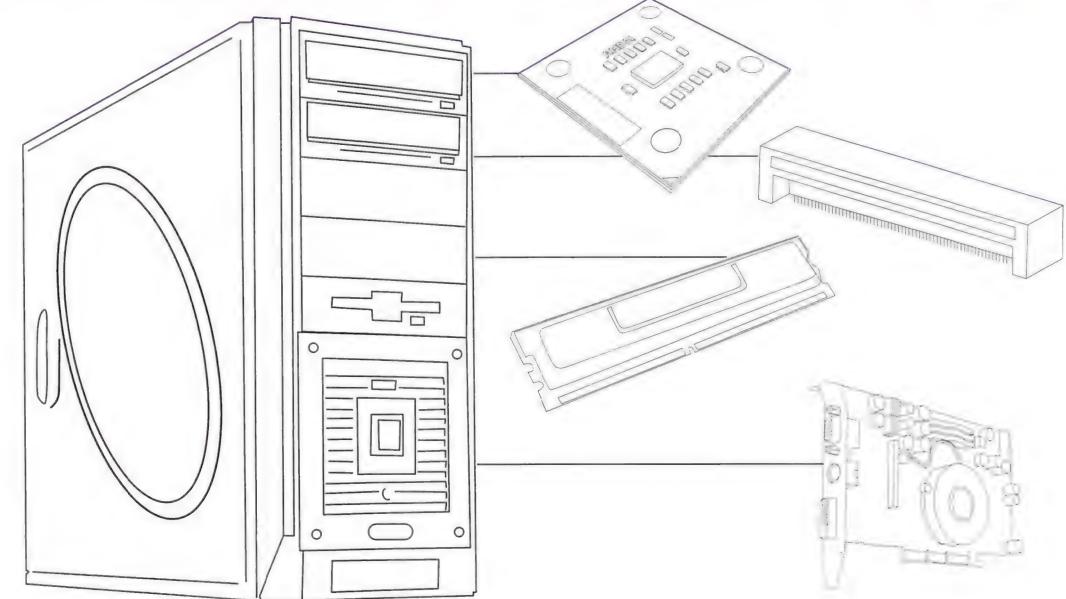
Admin Share Go into Computer Management on any Windows 2000 or XP machine (right-click My Computer, Manage), and go into Shared Folders and then Shares. You'll see IPC\$, C\$ and ADMIN\$. These are hidden shares Windows is making available, and anyone who knows an admin password to your machine and your IP address can connect to these shares and take a look at what's on your hard drive. If you stop sharing them, they will re-enable themselves when you reboot. Nice, huh? If this worries you (and it should!), go into the registry, navigate to HKLM\SYSTEM\CurrentControlSet\Services\lanmanserver\parameters.

Create a DWORD called AutoShareWks and set the value to zero (0). Disable the shares and you're done.

BSOD The Blue Screen Of Death. What Windows does when it throws a serious tantrum. It spits up lots of technical jargon only of interest to MS engineers, begins a physical dump of the RAM, and that's it. Work gone, applications gone... all is as dust in the winds of time and memory. Has been the cause of at least 13 homicidal rampages.

CAD Sometimes called Computer Assisted Design, it's also short for Control-Alt-Delete. This is also known as the three-fingered salute - generally understood to be the common user's first, last and only means to troubleshoot Windows.

DLL Dynamic Link Library. This is a file which contains a list of instructions for Windows and Windows-based applications. Back in the Middle Ages (1990's), everything was handled by DLLs, which gave rise to a situation known as "DLL Hell". Since everything was reliant on some obscure DLL, and version updates to hundreds of the blighters were released almost daily,



OS stability was something only to be dreamt about. Luckily things are better now, but there's a legacy of desktop admin guys strapped down in padded cells muttering "DLL illegal error" continuously and occasionally frothing at the mouth.

HID Human Interface Device. It's not a keyboard, it's not a mouse, it's a Human Interface Device. Political Correctness is inescapable. You will conform. You are neither male nor female - you are simply "human".

Paging File This is an area of hard drive space which Windows sets aside to use as RAM if the physical RAM becomes full. As it's dependant upon the speed and capabilities of the install drive, it's much slower than conventional RAM, so Windows doesn't tend to use it for foreground applications, unless the amount of physical RAM is too little or the application is too intense. If you're trying to load some phenomenal app on a machine with 256MB RAM, and the hard disk starts thrashing, that's the paging file at work.

Profile For every user on a Windows

2000 and XP machine, there is a corresponding profile. This is a folder under Documents and Settings (by default) which contains all the information personal to that user - desktop, Start Menu, application preferences, My Documents and so on. Like any area of Windows which gets used regularly, a profile can become corrupt. This is unpleasant - there is a lot of information stored in profiles. It's a good idea to back them up regularly, and the best way to do this is create another user (just a dud one), log in as that user, and then go into System Properties (via the Control Panel or Windows key + Pause/Break), and copy the profile to a backup location. You need to log in as another user as Windows locks certain profile files when that user is logged in.

Registry One big text file. OK, perhaps not. One big structured text file. Yes, that's better. Almost everything that can be tweaked, referenced or altered in the Windows environment is contained here. Somewhere. Finding anything in the

registry requires a flashlight, a machete and a team of luggage-bearing porters. Khaki shorts might be advisable too. The registry is big - treat it with respect, as anything which stuffs up your registry could neuter your entire Windows install. Before you make any alterations to registry keys, export the data first. If something goes wrong, you'll be glad you did.

TWAIN Technology Without An Interesting Name. Seriously! It's the global communications standard for imaging devices, like scanners, digital cameras and capture boards.

Incidentally, Apple Macs are going to be rebranded as TWAPP - Technology Without A Practical Purpose.

VM Virtual Machine. This is the Microsoft implementation of Sun Java, which shipped with all versions of Windows up to Windows XP. Why not XP? Well, Sun got rather annoyed that their software was being ripped... I mean, borrowed and rebranded. Now, no version of Windows will contain VM, so you'll need Sun Java for all your applet action.



XtremeOverclockers
Viper1337- CPU: Pentium4 800Mhz FSB - 3.0Ghz
18" UMAX TelevisionTFT. Case, K/Board, Mouse: Thermaltake Lanfire
Asus Radeon 9800XT 256mb. Modem, Speakers, DVD Combo Burner
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THE BEAST

In association with Altech Computers



Welcome to PCPP's Beast page, where we give you the blueprints for three very different PCs, each catering to a different wallet thickness and/or level of technical knowledge.

For those with extra phat, well padded money holders, look no further than the Beast. You'll be hard pressed to find a faster machine, but you'll pay through the nose for the privilege. Then there's the Mutant, for those who don't mind a bit of tinkering and overclocking. It offers the best balance between price and performance. Finally we have the Beastie. Cheap it may be, but slow it certainly is not.



CPU, MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

AMD Athlon FX-53 CPU

Goodbye Intel, hello AMD. The FX-53 is bloody expensive, but the fact that it's the fastest gaming processor around meant we had no choice but to fit out The Beast with this speed demon.

\$1258 www.amd.com



Asus SK8N

Yep, it's one incredibly expensive motherboard, but that's what you have to put up with when you want the best of the best. At least you'll know that it's of the highest quality.

\$412 www.asus.com.tw



1GB Corsair TWINX1024-3200XLPRO

It's all about low latency baby. Unlike DDR2, this stuff is happy to cruise along at a blazing 2-2-2-5 speed. Lightspeed here we come.

\$695 www.corsairmemory.com



Zalman 7000A-Cu

The Beast is so chunky, so wild and untameable that you need a real man's cooler stuck on the top of your mighty CPU. Zalman delivers, offering a chunk of metal that performs well and isn't too screamingly loud.

\$79 www.zalman.co.kr



Antec TruePower 550W

With 550 watts of blistering power you can plug in as many crazy case fans, cooling systems and front-mounted LCD panels as you like and still enjoy smooth, reliable gaming.

\$200 www.antec-inc.com



VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

Abit RX800XT RADEON X800XT

A grand just for the video card? Hey, if it was any cheaper we'd have our readers complaining that it's not beast-worthy.

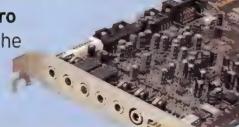
\$990 www.abit.com.tw



Creative Soundblaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro

The most powerful consumer-level soundcard on the market. Support for every sound format, including Dolby 6.1 surround.

\$499 australia.creative.com



Logitech Z680

Let your soundcard handle all the decoding and plug these Power Award winning speakers into the ports on the back. You've never heard PC speakers like these.

\$699 www.logitech.com



STORAGE AND OPTICAL

Sony DRU700A Dual Layer

Dual Layer burning is the way of the future. Not only does it allow for wads of storage, we can now backup our DVD collection without compression.

\$349 www.sony.com.au



Samsung SD-616ERPS 16x DVD-ROM

It's straight up and down, it's cheap, it's fast, it works well and you need it to copy - sorry, back up - DVDs using your nifty writer.

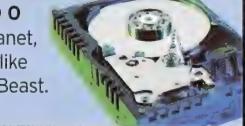
\$62 www.samsung.com.au



2x Western Digital 74GB Raptor WD740D RAID 0

Sure, they're not the biggest hard drives on the planet, but they're arguably the fastest. And with a name like Raptor, it's obvious they were created just for our Beast.

\$860 www.westerndigital.com



DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

17" Samsung 172X

It's might only be a 17" monitor, but it has the viewable area of a 19" CRT, at a fraction of the size. Blurring is a thing of the past due to the 12ms response time.

\$900 www.samsung.com.au



MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Keyboards and mice don't get much snazzier than this delectable combo.

\$210 www.microsoft.com.au



Antec P160

This beast of a case is perfect for a beast of a PC. A couple of temperature gauges on the front make it perfect for letting you know when your system is about to explode.

\$250 www.antec-inc.com



Panasonic PT-AE500E

Who needs a piddly monitor when this baby will throw a high resolution (1280 x 720) image 2.5m wide across the closest wall? The ultimate gaming experience.

\$3,899 www.panasonic.com.au



BEAST VALUE:

\$11362

THE MUTANT

Thanks to the popularity of overclocking and tweaking, we've included this machine to show you exactly what you can get away with for a very reasonable price. Tweaked to within an inch of its life, this is the machine we DO own, versus the Beast, which is the machine we'd like to be able to AFFORD to own.

Intel P4 2.8GHz "C" at 3.3GHz

This speedy little processor has the benefit of being overclockable to around the 3.3GHz mark at least. Hyperthreading support is a treat.

\$300 www.intel.com



Abit AI7

An 865PE based mobo from Abit, the AI7 has a very handy feature in that you can overclock your system directly from the Windows desktop. Which means you needn't delve into the confusing BIOS options ever again.

\$195 www.abit.com.tw



MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Sure, this combo isn't exactly cheap, but you can't skimp on the interface between you and your box of love. And it's all wireless, making it perfect to use from the comfort of your couch.

\$257 www.microsoft.com.au



Antec TrueControl 550W

What could be groovier than a PSU that comes with a 5.25" front plate with dials and knobs for controlling fan speed plastered all over it? Nothing, that's what.

\$210 www.antec-inc.com



Antec PlusView 1000AMG

An excellent pre-modded case, with more than enough fan mounts to keep your oc'd system nice and chillin'. And with this machine, you'll definitely make the most of the side window.

\$171 www.antec-inc.com



1GB Corsair TWINX-3200C2

Damn memory is getting cheap. Who'd have thought a year ago that you could now pick up a gig of ridiculously fast DDR-RAM for a mere \$377? Not us, that's for sure.

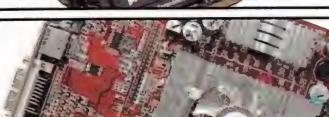
\$377 www.corsairmemory.com



XpertVision RADEON 9800XT

Amusingly, the video card is the single most expensive component of the Mutant. It's hard to believe that you can now get a RADEON 9800XT for a mere \$440, considering just how blazingly fast this video card is.

\$440 www.xpertvision.com.tw



Zalman VGA Heatpipe Cooler 80C-HP

Bolt this mighty thing to your video card, attach the included fan, and who knows what insane core speeds you can achieve?

\$68 www.zalman.co.kr



120GB Seagate IDE

The first upgrade HDD I ever bought was 6GB and cost \$447. So this is pretty damn cheap. Only standard IDE, but at this price we can't complain.

\$146 www.seagate.com



Creative SB Audigy

Lacks a few of the features found on the Audigy 2, but only the ones that don't really have much effect on gaming. There's a lot of soundcard here for not much cost.

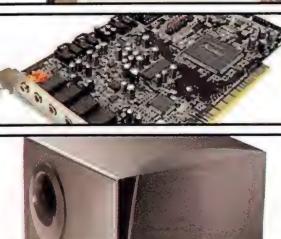
\$129 australia.creative.com



Creative Inspire 6.1 6600

They're so cheap they're good enough for the Mutant. No decoder, no difficult optical inputs, just ordinary wires plugging in to a set of extraordinary speakers.

\$249 australia.creative.com



Samsung 616ERPS 16x DVD-ROM

Same as the Beast, this drive is fast, dependable and has a slightly funkier facade than most of the beige monstrosities currently available.

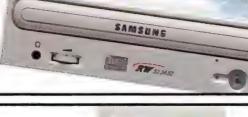
\$62 www.samsung.com.au



Samsung 252FRNS 52x32x52 CD-RW

Wow, these things sure got cheap didn't they? Burn CDs in hardly any time at all thanks to 52x writing. Backup all your digital LAN shots for posterity. Pose nude... no wait, don't.

\$59 www.samsung.com.au



19" Samsung 995 Dynaflat

Cheaper than the video card but still a lot of sleek, flat monitor. Nineteen inches is pretty much the minimum for decent gaming, and we can't wait until a 16ms LCD this big costs this much.

\$545 www.samsung.com.au



4x Antec Internal Illuminate

Pep up the Mutant with a few light sticks. Stick 'em on the monitor, in the case, wherever you like. USB powered and respond to sound - clap on, clap off! Other cosmetic additions to the Creature are limited only by your imagination..

\$176 www.antec-inc.com



MUTANT VALUE: \$3319

the beastie

The cheapest but worthiest PC of all, the Beastie is for all of us who need gaming, the web and to generally have fun without worrying about overclocking or our bank account.

AMD Athlon XP 2500+ Barton

The cheapest CPUs keep getting meatier and meatier.

\$146 www.amd.com



Abit NF7

nForce2 is good and this implementation of it is even better

www.abit.com.tw \$132

Antec Lanboy

Includes a 350W power supply, window and carry strap.

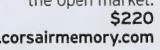
\$180 www.antec.com



512MB Corsair PC-3200

A budget PC with half a gig of RAM. All praise the open market.

\$220 www.corsairmemory.com



Elsa RADEON 9800

Yes, a 9800 in a budget system. Holy shit batman.

\$440 www.elsa.com.tw



80GB Seagate IDE

Plenty of room for not much cash. Dependable and reliable.

\$110 www.seagate.com



Creative Inspire 2500 2.1

Plug 'em in to the nForce2's onboard sound and it's MP3-tastic!

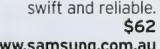
\$119 australia.creative.com



Samsung 616ERPS 16x DVD-ROM

Good enough for all the PCs on this page, swift and reliable.

\$62 www.samsung.com.au



Samsung 252FRNS 52x32x52 CD-RW

Cheap, fast, reliable, what more could you want from a CD-RW?

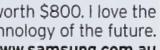
\$59 www.samsung.com.au



17" Samsung SyncMaster 753S

To think 17" monitors were once worth \$800. I love the technology of the future.

\$226 www.samsung.com.au



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\$64 www.kmepc.com



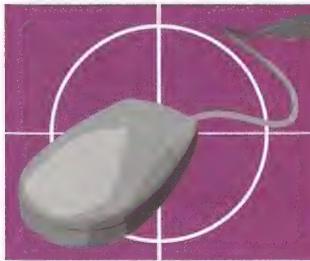
So, you want one of these three fine beasts?

Luckily, all of these components are available at

Altech Computers
www.altech.com.au
02 9735 5655



beastie value: \$1758



The Hub

YOUR ONLINE GAMING SERVER

Hosted by Ed Dawson

Risk and the MMORPG

Are we facing a gradual slide into mediocrity, driven by industry consolidation?

The cancellation of Warhammer Online for purely financial risk reasons doesn't bode well for the MMO space. With the cost of launching a massively multiplayer online game like Star Wars: Galaxies described as thirty million US dollars and upwards, the business proposition of an MMO game becomes a somewhat riskier animal - in a business that already has fearsome amounts of risk involved.

If you're building a triple-A game, you might modestly spend four million US dollars, building the game over two years. That's a certain amount of risk. Turn that game into an MMORPG, however and the risk snowballs - even if you're holding a completed gold copy of the greatest MMORPG ever produced - because of the huge infrastructure and service investment. And because nothing is a sure thing in entertainment. People's fickle attentions are difficult to hold at the best of times. While you might reasonably sell a lot of copies of a very good game, in the MMORPG world, that's not enough.

Microforte, the Australian company developing Citizen Zero, partly financed it by creating an



entire other game with a second team, which took two whole years. The time-frame for these things becomes outrageous. And competition is nearing white-hot. This is a cause for concern.

When a game that showed obvious potential such as Warhammer Online can't make the price of admission, does this mean that we're going to see fewer and fewer launches of innovative new MMORPGs? Does it mean the likes of Sony and EA will cling to their flagship MM titles, endlessly re-inventing them, because the risk of doing anything else is petrifying from a business perspective? Let's hope not.

I hold hope that the onward march of networking and server technology will result in a reduction of the costs for a MMOGs back-end. I hold hope that the size of the MMOGs that we think are giant today, will fit in the foyer of the later, greater and more ambitious massively multiplayer



online role playing games, allowing a "Lite" class to emerge.

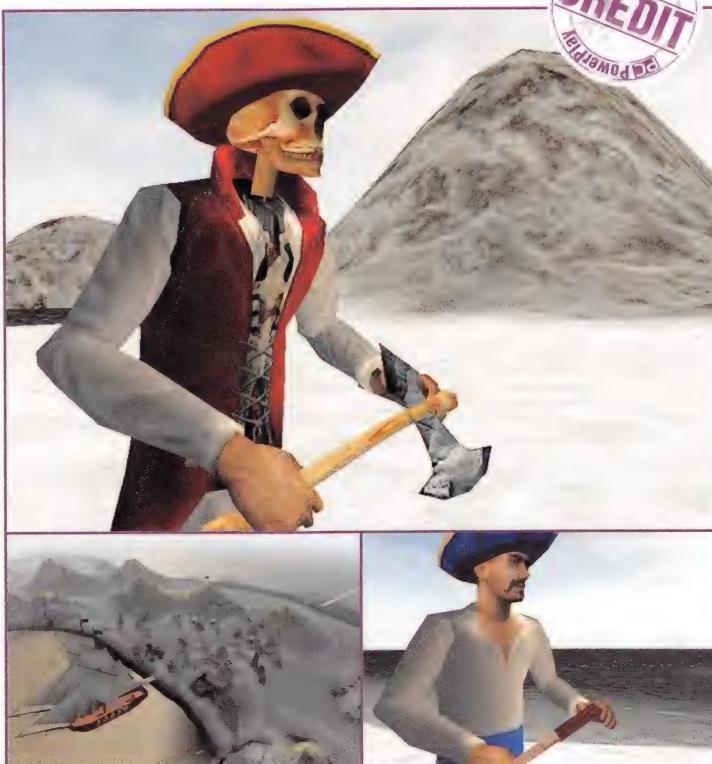
But perhaps the prospects for online games aren't all miserable - the major players who run successful MMOGs right now will feel justifiably confident in running other projects like those in future. And they'll develop expertise within that could branch off into newer, more exciting titles that can engage the masses with fresh ideas, while reducing their risk. Making it less dangerous to invest. Making way for titles like Warhammer Online? Let's hope so.



Battlefield Pirates .23 Alpha

For: BF1942 Version: 23 Alpha URL: <http://www.bfpirates.com/> Size: 56MB Score: 3/5

Battlefield Pirates brings some honest, old-fashioned "Arrgh" to your online gaming experience. Totally converting assets to loosely resemble the characters and setting of Pirates of the Caribbean, this impressive mod pits a band of skeleton scullions against a human crew of salty sea dogs called the Peg Legs. In a scurvy display of realism, historical weapons such as cannons and muskets are tragically inaccurate and slow, requiring an enthusiastic barrage in order to hit anything. Making up for it you'll be equipped with deadly steel such as the requisite cutlass and single-shot pistol. Which are extremely handy when you're boarding larger ships with the tiny rowboat craft - this side of the game is a lot of fun. Emplaced coastal towers bristle with cannons, while nicely modelled galleons heave over the waves, manoeuvring their own arsenal into range and position. There are a few tense moments in the seconds after you spot an enemy vessel, just piercing the fog head. You're sweating as you try to manoeuvre your craft into the optimal firing angle before he does. With fifteen cannons on board, there's quite a fusilade to let rip when you finally line things up. Pirates is soon to launch their first beta - keep your eyes peeled.



WORLD OF PIRATES OPEN BETA

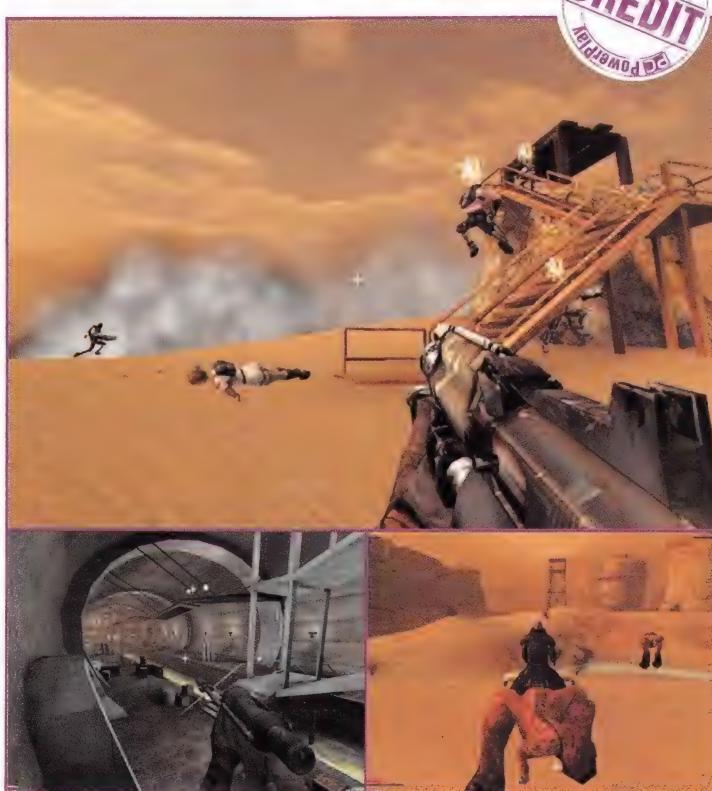
Trade in pieces of eight and train your parrot to say "Gangplank"!
World of Pirates, a cute isometric-view trading simulator has gone to public beta. It ought to be fairly solid by now - the game's gone through two whole years of closed beta testing. The developers are obviously perfectionists - this ought to be reflected in the gameplay! You can play as a Merchant, Governor, Pirate or Headhunter. There's also nine different ship classes with ungradeable statistics. You can besiege towns and cities, taking them over by force. There's even classy 2D swordfights, ala Defender of the Crown. Visit www.worldofpirates.com to get in on the action.

Shattered Oasis v2.2

For: UT2004 Version: 2.2 URL: <http://www.shatteredoasis.com> Size: 252MB Score: 3/5

Shattered Oasis is a UT 2004 mod which is set in a grim future setting where vicious combat rages over the scant remaining resources. Your post-apocalyptic choice of vehicles includes a Gyrocopter, the Hog, a truck with two gunner positions as well as the driver, the humourous "BoomTruck", a huge semi-trailer with a busted old tank on the tray and the SandCow - a hilarious rideable creature which is often gibbed spectacularly by faster-moving things with knobbly tyres. Pressing attack while seated on the SandCow produces a fearsome "Moo" sound. This mod has a real irreverent flavour and some really quirky looking, entropically decayed and rusting vehicles ala Mad Max.

There are two game modes of note in Shattered Oasis, "Arena", which is reminiscent of the old classic Quake Arena, which is a one-on-one battle to the death, observed by the players in waiting, with the winner persisting through rounds. "Detonation" is an objective mode where you're trying to get into the enemy base and flip their self-destruct switch. They can switch it off, but if you can defend the switch for ten seconds, then a mass explosion is the result - and ignominious humiliation for the other team.



GOOD MAPPING CREATES COMMUNITY CLAPPING

Battlefield Vietnam community authors contribute classy maps
The ubiquitous Planet Battlefield has released a map pack of community-creations based on their top five ranked maps by community members. This collection couldn't come at a better time, as the DICE Canada/EA updates are quite sporadic in nature, so the official maps are becoming pretty overplayed. Until the 1.1 patch is out, bringing The Defence of Con Thien and two new helicopters, these new maps are a great stop-gap measure. There's a cool melee combat map and one where the NVA have stolen a US base - giving them the good helicopters. The settings range from thick, impenetrable jungle to scenarios based around the nicely defensible temples.

**ULTIMA X: ODYSSEY
CANCELLED**

The Unreal-engine successor to Ultima Online falls by the wayside
 Ultima Online has been unrepentantly two-dimensional since it was launched. It is a very good two dimensional game, where the developers have done a great job compensating for 2D's limitations. However, nearly all other MMORPGs are rendered in deliciously crisp 3D graphics these days, hence the Unreal engine chosen to power Ultima X: Odyssey - until it was cancelled. The cancellation is apparently to re-allocate resources to the existing UO, an expansion pack for that game and another UO product, yet to be announced. It will be interesting to see if they stick with the Unreal engine for the eventual, inevitable transition to 3D.

**WARHAMMER ONLINE
HIT BY MJOLLNIR**

The highly anticipated MMORPG is cancelled for financial reasons
 The general Manager of WarHammer Online for Climax Development Limited, Robin Dews posted a message on the front page of the Warhammer Online website. In the message, the explanation states that the decision to cancel the game was a combined decision made with their publisher Games Workshop, following a review of the progress of the game, the costs to date and the future costs. They came to the conclusion that they couldn't harbour the risk of the large start-up fees required to launch an MMO these days (some tens of millions of US dollars). The project had been underway for over two years. Sadly, it seems that this project, which showed such promise, has been a victim of an accounting monster armed with a +5 magic missile. The studio will continue on with another project they have underway.

CarBall v2.0

For: UT2004 Version: 20 URL: <http://nzue.skankyflat.net/cb/home.htm> Size: 14.5MB Score: 4/5



Great news for all the soccer fans out there, CarBall is a twisted combination of a dune buggy destruction derby and "Futbol". You drive like a maniac, ram the ball with your car and try to slam it into the goal. Predictably, there's huge smashes, a lot of stunts and an arsenal of power-ups to foil your foes. Nitro boosts and repair kits are familiar fare for racing games, but the "GooPile", which when dropped, damages buggys you is slightly weird. There's also the PocketRocket, which will wipe out an enemy player, or create a blast effect that will shift the ball. There's also landmines which will flip you car and an invisibility powerup. This last one is great for avoiding any "tackle" manoeuvres - the ball appears to be tackling its way up the field of its own accord! You'll spend a lot of time jumping around over objects and off things, using the stunt mutator controls, which will make your car jump up and spin around in the air like Ronaldinho on PCP. CarBall is a simple concept, but there's a certain bent appeal to it, along the lines of Mario Kart. It's fast, furious and a good combination of interactive modes.

Clone Bandits v1

For: UT2004 Version: 1 URL: www.demidurstudios.com/CloneBandits Size: 51MB Score: 3/5



An especially warped little mod, Clone Bandits' premise is a group of post-apocalyptic bandits are in combative competition to collect as many most clones as they can. Territory can be taken, in the form of Clone Pumps, which will siphon clones from the enemy. If you like to take a bit more aggressive approach, you can invade the enemy base and just grab Clone Jars laying around and flit them back to base for an easy score. The game concept is weird enough, but the vehicles take even bolder steps into weirdom. The Moscowboy, essentially a motorbike married to a large missile, is basically a suicide vehicle, with no other options than a headlong plunge into the face of the enemy, where you'll make some nice fireworks for the team score. Another weapon, the Loung Tank can drop deadly Flamingo Mines, which resemble the plastic flamingos made infamous by their poor application as landscape gardening decorations. This, through some unfathomable leap of logic, is the ideal shape for a land-mine that is filled with nitroglycerin. Having said that, the models in Clone Bandits look extremely nice, especially the other vehicle the Barracuda, which is like a Charger with two miniguns on the bonnet. Keep a sharp eye on this one as it gets closer to another release.



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BOOTCAMP

Online Tips and Tactics

JOINT OPERATIONS: TYPHOON RISING

Bennett Ring

1

Command & Conquer

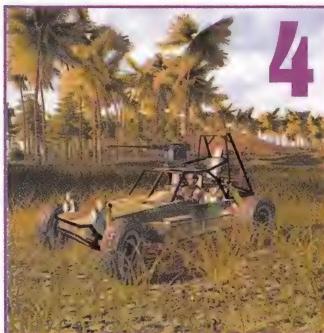
It takes a special kind of soldier to lead his team into battle, but the satisfaction of leading seventy gun-wielding killing machines into victory is hard to match. The only problem is convincing the other players to allow you to lead. Most of the time they don't understand how the interface works, so give them a brief explanation once you've sent a join invite around. Once you've got a plenty of players under your control, divide them into fireteams and let the orders commence. Just don't spam orders too frequently or you'll confuse the mindless little peons.



2

Sharing is caring

Yes, it's an obvious one, but if I had a dollar for every time I'd seen a chopper zoom off without any passengers, I'd have enough to buy a new pocket protector. If you use the vehicles the way they're supposed to be used you can make a huge difference to the outcome of a battle. Just one fully loaded vehicle can be enough to capture a point, as there will usually only be a handful of defenders in place. Don't drive right up to the capture point either, as you'll get mowed down by a .50 emplacement faster than you can say "Damn we should have dropped off behind that clump of trees".



4

Flanker

It's amazing how lazy gamers are. They're not even using their real legs when playing Joint Ops, yet they still want to take the quickest route to the target. Which just happens to be the most predictable. Therefore 98% of the defenders are set up facing that direction, with guns at the ready. The difference in your lifespan is amazing if you simply skirt around the capture point and attack it from a different angle - combine this with a few flashbangs and it's possible for a lone soldier to take out four or five enemies.



5

Balance your fire team

A team full of medics is great for Team King of the Hill Matches, but for the standard Assault and Secure matches it's a bit of overkill. However, it is a great way to annoy your enemies when they realise they're fighting a team of the undead. Try to balance out the roles in your team, instead of just playing the roles you enjoy most. The majority of troops should be standard riflemen, followed next by medics to keep the team going. A handful of gunners and engineers will help to beef up your firepower, but gunners are next to useless on servers with tracers enabled. Notice how I didn't recommend going sniper? Get the message yet?



3

Don't snipe

STOP SNIPING CHICKENSHT. WHEN HALF YOUR TEAM IS COMPRISED OF SNIPERS, YOU'LL NEVER CAPTURE ANY SPAWN POINTS. YOU THINK YOU'RE HELPING YOUR TEAM? WELL, YOU'RE NOT, YOU COWARDLY SCUM-SUCKING DIRTBAG WHO DINES ON THE TEAT OF A FILTHY PIG! GET OFF YOUR ASS AND DO SOME LEG WORK! (Yes, I have issues with too many snipers on my team. Sure, sniping is fun, but each team only needs a handful of harassing snipers, not half the fricking team).

6

HUDDle up

There are a couple of icons in the top right of your HUD that show you exactly which of your points needs defending, and which enemy points are vulnerable to attack. They even tell you exactly how many people are at each point. So for the love of God/Allah/Satan, use them! If you see one of your points flashing because it's being taken by the bad guys, go to it! And don't bother fighting battles that having nothing to do with capturing the next point - you're just wasting resources.



Let's go camping

There's a big difference between capturing a point, and having it fully camped. And yes, camping is FINE in this game - we're not playing Quake 3 anymore kiddies. Most players tend to rush off as soon as the possession of a point has switched to their team, but that's only half the work. This usually leaves one or two smart players hanging around to fully camp the base, as a fully camped base becomes a valuable spawn point. So stick around and help camp it - the more players there are, the less time camping takes.



Bye Bye Mr Sniper

Don't worry - you won't be the only one plagued by half a team full of poxy snipers. The other team will be suffering the same problem and chances are that a few of these are sitting near your main base, capping pilots in the head as the chopper engines warm up. As a result, it's always fun to spend a little time going on sniper clearing missions. Follow the sound of the gunshots to get a bead on where the guy is hiding - if he's smart he'll see you coming and stop firing so you can't find him. If he does this, simply hide in some grass for a little while.



Say Yes to grass kids!

One of the coolest features of JO is the grass and the way that it works at long range. However, if you go prone in a pile of grass on a ridgeline, you're going to stick out like the proverbial dog's red rocket. Sure, your character's texture will blend in with the surrounding scenery, but the outline of your character will be nice and visible for all to see. So crawl a few feet below the ridgeline. Grass is also great for capturing points - simply dive into it, and stop shooting. Your enemies will spend the next five minutes trying to figure out where the hell you are.

10



Flarey Floss

A smart pilot is impossible to shoot down with Stingers, due to a slight flaw in the game. Each chopper has a magical, endless supply of flares, so you can keep pumping the fireworks longer than a 4th of July show. Just keep on tapping that space bar to keep the flares a flowin'.

Passengers can also launch flares. If you'd rather not keep launching them all the time, wait until you hear a beeping sound which indicates a missile launch. Unfortunately flares can't stop you from being blown out of the air by heavy machine guns.

The Secret Diary of MMO Planetside

Chapter 3 - Saving Private Erk by George Soropos

Day 986 of this endless, deathless war, and I'm wondering about the sanity of our glorious leaders.

Again. We took Kisim today, one of the major bases on the island of Hossim. It was also my first mission as a medic. After my disastrous experience with romance a few months back I decided the best way to get over it was to help other people with their problems instead of wallowing in my own. I took the three minute nano-degree in medicine from the beat-up vending machine at my Laundromat. It blanketed out for a while during the course on hysterical pregnancy and I'll probably never be able to perform a decent eyebrow transplant but apart from that I was all set.

All set for what? Not fifteen minutes had gone by after taking Kisim when a runner from HQ drops in on top of us with an urgent mission. Four grunts had bought the farm two days ago. Gee big deal. But they were all brothers see, all Erks, and they'd bought it permanently... ouch. They'd been together in a Galaxy transport when it was shot down, but the tubes they tried to respawn into had already been hijacked by pirates who were using them to make illegal copies of the latest Star Wars UltraDVD box set. The system somehow got its wires crossed and the four unlucky Erks ended up as a rather confused director's commentary track that begins with twelve minutes of screaming followed by at least a half an hour of "WTF!" and then a cacophony of arguments about Princess Leia's buns. An interesting way to go at least.

But here was the kicker, there is a fifth brother. Big, Total, Bloody and Stinking Erk were gone, but Super is still out there, somewhere, and orders from HQ are to go find him and bring him home. Our squad leader EVILshenron got us all together and gave us the bad news. A tough mission way behind enemy lines,

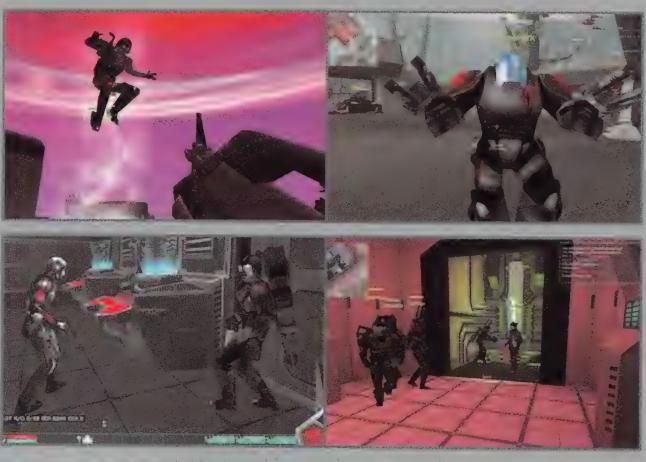
no support, no reinforcements and no bottle shop with EFTPOS!

Day 987 came and went without incident. We used the South East Warp Gate on Hossim to jump to Ceryshen where our boy was supposed to be. Setup camp, Deathcow and Raign showed us how to cook a snow crawler in shoulder pieces from their armour, which was great, until they woke up the next morning totally infested with carnivorous ants. I had to perform my first ever skin graft using the hide from an unlucky snow crawler, ah that made everyone laugh. Except for Deathcow and Raign who now looked like Spot and Rover. They'll be back to normal after their next respawn, so we all laughed it up some more.

Day 989 took us past a Vanu held tower south east of Keelit, the last reported location of out target. The Vanu fired off a few shots as we looked around but didn't come out after us. We'd lost Warland's squad by this point but ours was mostly intact. Deadringer's squad was acting as scout and came back with the news that there was action around Keelit, maybe our boy had moved on to there. So we tried our luck.

There was a small force of our blokes trying to take Keelit, a key base in the Ceryshen network. They weren't doing very well and were glad of the support from our Deliverer and its many guns. But most importantly one of those blokes was Private SuperErk! We were told where to find him and I - being the medic and obviously the sensitive, caring type - was given the job of breaking the news about his brothers. In situations like this it's hard to predict what is going to happen, maybe we'd have to restrain Super, maybe give him a shoulder to cry on. When he finally looked up and out of his MAX suit his words were kind of surprising.

"So are my brothers on the normal set or the Special Edition?"



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DVD CONTENTS



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- Amju Super Golf
- BALLOONrain
- Cycling Manager 4
- Dragoon: The Prussian War Machine
- Galactic Federation
- Juiced
- MVP Baseball 2004
- NHL Eastside Hockey Manager
- Painkiller [MP]
- Codename: Panzers
- Soldiers: Heroes of World War II



EXTRAS

- Gravion [DVD Episode]
- Tribes 2 [Free Game]
- Savage: The Battle for Newerth [14 day trial]

TRAILERS

- Half Life 2
- Juiced

LotR: TBfMe

- LSL: Magna Cum Laude
- Need for Speed Underground 2
- The Sims 2
- Star Wars: Republic Commando
- Victory '04 - Episode 2

MODS

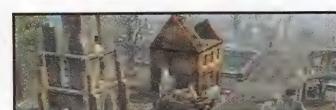
- Battlefield Pirates [BF 1942]
- CarBall v2.0 [UT 2004]
- Clone Bandits v1 [UT 2004]
- Shattered Oasis [UT 2004]

PATCHES

- Far Cry 1.2
- Joint Operations v1.2.0.10
- Pro Rugby Manager 2004 v1.1
- X2: The Threat v1.2/v1.3 - v1.4 [AUS]

BUNKER

Heaps more wallpaper, free games, Winamp skins, map packs and addon files for all your favourite games. Come get some!



UTILITIES

- Catalyst Radeon Display Driver 4.7.8.03 - f
- DivX Player (with DivX Codec) 5.2 - f
- Fresh UI 7.15 - f
- nVidia ForceWare Graphics Driver 61.76 - f
- Windows Media Player 9 - f
- Winamp 5.03 - f
- WinRAR 3.3 - s
- WinZip 9.0 - s

WALLPAPERS

Thanks to the guys at GameWallpapers.com who have supplied us with these wallpapers, this month we have wallpapers for games like City of Heroes, Ashen, Destruction Derby: Arenas and X-Men



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Yellow Boots

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Apparently, right, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I heard somewhere that Chanel No. 7, my favourite TV station, right, this year, okay, crashed and burned because it invested too heavily in reality television.

As constant readers would know, the boots and I have a certain interest in reality television, recently borne out by a fairly violent encounter with reality web-broadcasting outfit www.eatmysharks.com which caused the death of a highly trained commando parrot and the destruction of three blocks of trendy redeveloped restaurants in an exclusive part of Sydney's Darling Harbour.

Point is, at the end of that rather trying day the boots and I hopped the ferry home to Balmain, hauled ourselves up the stairs in our apartment block because the lift was broken again, and burst into our trendy 1.5 bedroom flat (owned by my parents) just in the nick of time for seven hours of uninterrupted reality television on Channels No. 7, No. 9 and No. 10.

Over the course of that evening, we saw a couple of restaurants go out of business, a bunch of rednecks fight over the colour of the tiles in their new house, a woman undergo painful surgery in pursuit of the beauty myth, and a pool full of layabouts spend two hours trying to out-guess a faceless corporate production committee about what ridiculous hoop they were going to get the layabouts to jump through next.

"You know," I said to the boots where they lay propped up on the coffee table, "they ought to make some of these shows into computer games. And they ought to pay us to advise them, you know, on design and stuff."

As if on cue, the phone rang. Several days later I found myself indeed advising a powerful but insistently anonymous production company on possible computer game treatments of the various reality shows currently infesting free-to-air television.

"Why should they get all the money?" demanded the CEO, who I'll call Brick for reasons which should be fairly obvious.

"You're asking why money from television shows should only go to people who make television shows?" I asked, just to get it clear in my head.

"Exactly. I think it's time the interactive entertainment industry got a slice of the TV action," he said, twirling his handlebar moustache. No, really.

So we fell to brainstorming.

Bigger Brother

At first we thought the gamer should take the part of Bigger Brother himself and mercilessly torture the inhabitants of his shockingly gaudy and kitsch house until they all went mad or started compulsively humping the furniture. But then we realised it would be more fun to actually be one of the inhabitants, desperately trying to stay under the AI audience's radar so they



BIGGER BROTHER

wouldn't think to vote for them. "They only ever vote off the interesting people," Brick observed, with uncommon clarity.

Insane Renovation 3D

Here's the concept: the player is given a junkie-infested tenement block and has to convert it into luxury apartments in less than 12 weeks. The problem is compounded by the fact that the tenement - despite being run down, soaked in piss and built on a mixture of sand, clay and collapsing sewerage - is in Sydney so it has a market value of \$4.6 million. First the player has to raise the funds and then beat either the AI or other human players with lengths of two-by-four until they agree on the colour of the carpet in the living room.

Karaoke Massacre

"The main problem with Australian Idol," said Brick, "is that the losers are allowed to escape with their lives." The boots and I had to agree. This game will be similar to Sony's plastic microphone karaoke game, in that it will also come with an even plastickier microphone which is carefully designed to explode into larynx-piercing shrapnel if the player hits a bum note more than six times in a row, or indeed responds to criticism from the judges with anything stoic along the lines of "yeah okay Dicko, I'm just up here having a go, you know?"

The Naughty Apprentice

Donald Trump's new reality humiliation-a-thon

is great TV, sure, but where's the famous corporate option of sleeping with the boss to keep your job? Using the Singles: Flirt Up Your Life engine - which, oddly enough, Brick's company has already licensed - The Naughty Apprentice is a more... fleshly take on Trump's effort. While the infamous boardroom scenes will still form an integral part of the game, there will be a button that flashes red when the option of jumping up on the massive mahogany table and doing a strip-tease becomes available. After being fired the player - either male or female, it doesn't matter - will have exactly four minutes to somehow get Trump to say, "Actually baby, now you're UNFIRED. Oh yeah." Big bonus points for that.

And so Brick and the boots and I sat back, satisfied with our day's work. Then I heard the oh-so-familiar sound of breaking glass.

"Ha!" screamed an executive vice president of Chanel No. 7 as he leapt through the window. "We bugged this office like the geniuses of espionage we are, and now we'll steal all your brilliant ideas and make games of our own! The money will stay with us! It will never escape!"

"Fine," I said, "but why are you telling us?"

"Shut up loser!" cried the executive vice president, and jumped out the window again. The whole exchange had taken about ten seconds. Brick blinked.

"Who was that?" he asked.

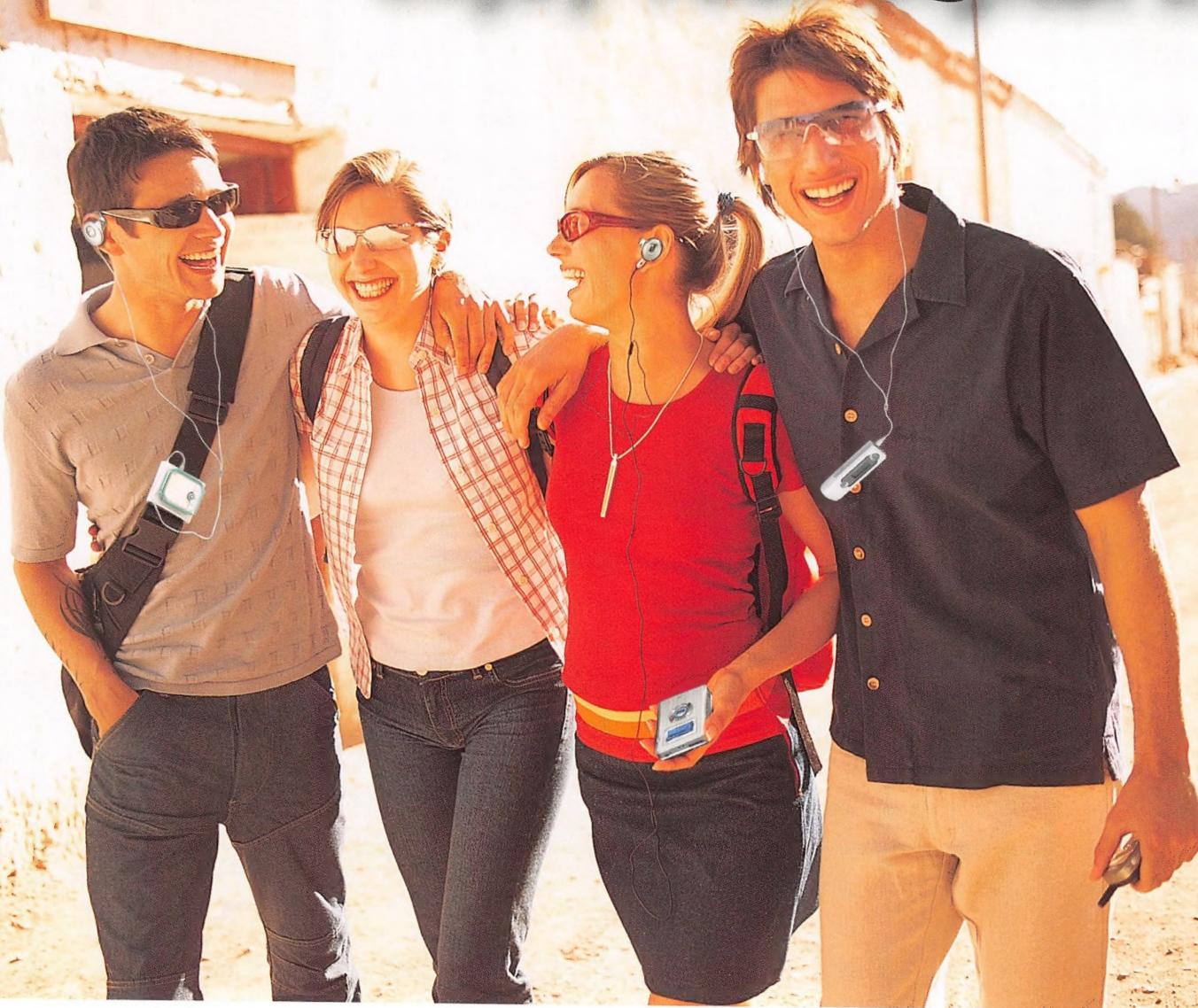
"A fan," I replied.

"Awesome!" he said, twirling his moustache.

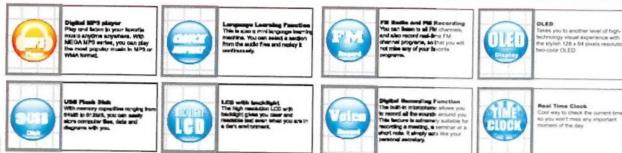
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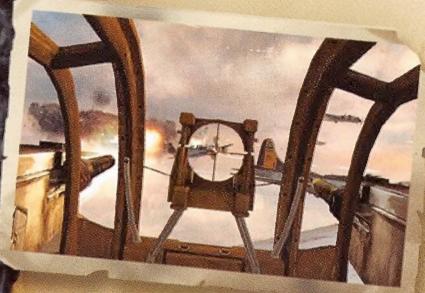
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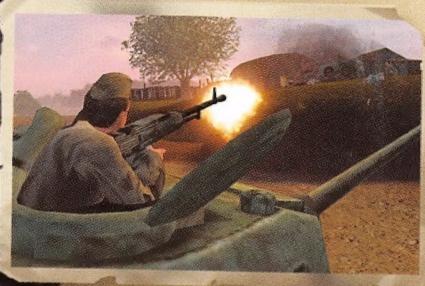
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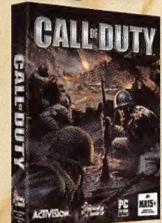


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